

O God, Our Help in Ages Past
Acts 2:1-15
May 19, 2024 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC
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Happy birthday!! Today is Pentecost, the birthday of the church, and we will have cake to celebrate during the fellowship hour after worship. I hope you will all stay to have some.

Like every human birth that I know anything about, the birthday of the church was messy. In fact, we think of Jesus' disciples as these paragons of virtue, the founders of our faith, but in fact, they were a hot mess themselves on that first Pentecost morning.

I mean, we learned from the Gospel of Matthew that Jesus had told them all to go to all the nations of the earth and make disciples of them and baptize them and teach them. In the Gospel of John, Jesus had told them to go out into the world and forgive people. Just forgive them. Out there. Not in here. And yet here they sit in a closed room, waiting, praying (good for them!), and waiting some more, maybe afraid of the world out there, which had so recently killed Jesus, just for being his own sacred self. The disciples are not out baptizing or teaching or forgiving. They are waiting.

And God sends the Holy Spirit to rush among them like a great wind, to sit on their heads like fire, to fill them to overflowing so that it is no longer possible to sit in here in this room, just us by ourselves, no longer possible to do nothing, and out they run into the street and start preaching – all of them preaching at the same time, in languages that they themselves did not know, but their listeners did. It was utter chaos.

And then we come to my favorite verse about Peter in the whole Bible. Someone in the crowd looks at all of them running around with fire on their heads, speaking in tongues, and says, "Those guys are drunk!" And Peter says, "Of course not, it's only 9:00 o'clock in the morning!" And you could take that to mean that if you had caught them all a little later in the day, being drunk might not be out of the question, but at 9:00?!? That's a little early.

So here we have a picture of the earliest Christian church – hiding instead of going out into the world as Jesus had commanded them, waiting instead of acting, casting lots to see who will take Judas's place among the twelve (and the one they pick is never heard from again), and maybe they are passing the time with a little too much wine as the days of waiting drew out. They were a mess. A hot mess. Not acting at all like the great evangelizers, the spreaders of good news and forgiveness, that Jesus had ALREADY called them to be.

But God did not give up on them. Instead, God sent the Holy Spirit to pick them up and shove them out into the world, to give them words to say and deeds to do. God breathed holy fire into this sodden group of Jesus' followers and turned them into a church – turned them into THE church – that led eventually to us here this morning.

So, if we sometimes think that WE might be a hot mess, that WE might not be heeding God's call for our church, you can know that we are right there with the disciples. If you sometimes notice that we haven't quite got our act together, or that we are waiting rather than acting, well, we might be just like them. Being the church, being the Body of Christ in this broken world, is a tall order, a daunting call, a challenging claim on our lives, and we are never going to be perfect at it, any more than the earliest believers were perfect.

The choir sang a moment ago:

O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.

The last verse of that hymn is this:

O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,
Be thou our guide while life shall last, and our eternal home.

We can look back at the birth of the church and see that God acted through a bunch of earnest, caring, fearful, very human people – people a lot like us. Because we know that God helped them, because we can look back in our own church history and see all the times God has helped and guided and protected us, we can know for sure that God will be our shelter and our guide and our hope for years to come. And don't be surprised if God calls us to do some things that are totally new and unexpected and a little crazy. Being the church is an awesome responsibility, an exciting ride, and we are not in charge. God is!

So come, Holy Spirit, and fill us with your love and power this morning. Send us out into the world, always with your help, to be the church for this time and this place.

Amen