

When someone else takes over

Acts 2:1-21

The Rev. Dr. L. Gregory Bloomquist
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Most of you know my wife, Rachel. She is an elementary school teacher. I love Rachel and I have great respect for her as a teacher. You know why I love her. But, do you know why I have so much respect for her as a teacher? Because I once tried to do what she does every day.

I remember my one fleeting experience with teaching Kindergarten. I was a naïve 18 year old, just out of high-school, and I was asked to fill in for a day at a local school in another country where I was living at the time. I was fine for about 10 minutes, and then the little monsters went bananas. There were kids throwing things, climbing on the desks, shouting. They were actually taunting me. The principal walked in and stared and didn't see me hiding behind a door: "Who's in charge here?" Needless to say, I wasn't and someone else came in and took over.

That was chaos, and someone needed to take over and bring order to that chaos. That's what Rachel does 10 months of the year: she keeps order where there could be just chaos if the little ones were left to themselves.

There's another kind of situation where someone needs to take over. That's where nothing has happened and nothing will happen. For example, do you know how paralyzed you can become when you are afraid?

Imagine soldiers, pinned down, facing the enemy who has them literally paralyzed where they are. The commanding officer has been shot and can't give orders. Someone else -- hopefully the next in command -- has to take over or that will be the end of the whole platoon. But what happens if he doesn't? Then someone else has to take over. It's that easy. And it's that difficult.

Think of the apostles gathered in the upper room with a hundred other fearful believers that Sunday morning, about 8.30 in the morning, almost 2000 years ago. It had been fifty days since Jesus had been executed and then three days later had appeared to them to their shock and disbelief. But, he didn't take over, and mobilize them from their fear and paralysis. He simply appeared to them from time to time during the next 40 days, and then suddenly, on the 40th day – 10 days ago – he was gone again. Surely they must have asked themselves on that Ascension Day the same question that they had asked themselves on that Good Friday: "Now what?" And so they went back to their upper room to wait, and to pray.

The answer to their question "Now what?" came 10 days later, on that 50th day after Passover, today, about 9 AM. They were all still gathered together in the upper room, a mixture of fear and prayer and wondering, pinned down by the fear that if they made known their allegiance to Jesus they would experience the same fate that he had.

When suddenly there was a rush of wind like a tornado. What appeared to be flames of fire began to dance on the heads of the 120 gathered in the room. They began to speak languages that most of them had never heard.

And then, as they did so, that wind pushed them out of that upper room and into the street of the city. There they were surrounded by other Jews who had gathered for the great feast of Pentecost, Jews who had come from all over the world for the celebration of that day.

They were tossed by the wind, moving around as if they were drunk, but speaking very clearly and coherently in all the languages of the people present. And what the people heard were these 120 apparently drunk men and women proclaiming the great acts of God in Jesus Christ.

How was this happening? The apostles and those with them were not from those different lands. That was clear from their faces and the colour of their skin. Nor were they scholars. That was clear from the way they were dressed. Do you know how they were dressed? Many, like Peter, and James and John were dressed like the simple farmers that they were, farmers of the sea, fishermen. They were dressed like fishermen, like farmers.

So, the people looked at them, driven as if by the wind and flushed with fire in their faces, babbling in dozens of different languages, and laughed and said: "Oh, they're just drunk. That's all."

But, then, Peter, stood up and spoke in a language that they could all understand. This unlearned fisherman, with no schooling, who, when the going got rough, he got going.... literally. He had fled!

But, it wasn't Peter who got up in his own power. Someone else had taken command of Peter and of them all. It was the Holy Spirit that Jesus had promised and this was the fulfilment that Jesus had promised.

And so Peter got out of the trench and, under the command of the Holy Spirit, began to speak: "These men and women are not drunk as you think. They are in fact the first-fruits of the fulfilment of God's promise to Israel." He went on to quote Scripture from the prophet Joel: this is exactly what Joel had promised hundreds of years ago, and it is happening now.

Then, as you are going to hear over the next weeks, he began to tell them how it was all happening because of Jesus, who had been crucified, but whom God had raised in victory.

As a result: 3000 of those who were listening to Peter, believed what he was saying, and were baptized that very day. That's about 1/4 of the population of Massena.

The story of God always begins with God taking over.

In the beginning, when there was only chaos, like my kindergarten classroom, God took over and created order in the heavens and the earth.

When the people of Israel were paralyzed in Egypt, God stepped in and took over, very much as He did on Pentecost. He blew open the Red Sea and led the people out of Egypt into a new land.

But, what happened?

Do you remember what happened when Israel had been in their new land for a while? They began to think that they had done everything to deserve their new land... that it was they who had found their land, settled it, claimed it. So, they felt quite good about themselves and started to settle down and think that they were quite special and that God should definitely be pleased with them for having done such a good job. They started to build big houses for themselves and tell other peoples around them to respect them because they were powerful. Why, even God respected them!

The church started out at Pentecost with God clearly taking command of a motley crew of fishermen, tax collectors and women. They were pushed into the streets and able to proclaim the gospel as if they had been

in seminary all of their lives! And for years, this is how the church lived: on the move, under God's command, claiming territory for God, with great loss of life -- think of Stephen, the church's first martyr -- but bringing healing, and hope, and the word of salvation to those who were dying.

But, like Israel, the church eventually began to take all this for granted. Like Israel, the church began to be quite pleased with itself, and the people of God began to build big houses for themselves and think how pleased God was with them. Like Israel, they even wanted to build God a house. A tent wasn't good enough for God, Israel said; let's build him a Temple. The church said: preaching in the streets isn't good enough for God; let's build him a basilica!

So, eventually the descendants of those first fishermen took their old fishing boats -- called "naves" in Latin --, turned them over on the shore, and made churches that resembled upside-down boats, our naves, with the keel on top, rather than in the water.

Do you know how impossible it is to stay put? Why, even the earth moves daily under our feet. Massena's last major earthquake was 1944. I was in Ottawa last summer when we had one. The earth is moving daily underneath our feet.

The world around us is moving constantly, constantly changing and always in motion.

God will not let His people settle down. And so, as God has shaken the people of Israel time and again, and as God shook the fearful disciples of Jesus in the upper room by the wind of the Spirit blew on that Pentecost morning, so God today continues to shake the church, to blow through the churches that we have built to keep from being pushed out into the streets. God takes our fearfulness, our paralysis to move, our desire to hide in our churches that have become places now where we protect ourselves more than where we sail forth and He turns them over and puts the keel back in the water and begins to blow a wind that fills the sails of that boat and sends it where it may not have thought it would ever go and certainly may not have wanted to go. And so the Church moved by the Spirit of God becomes a beautiful sailboat, whose sails are filled with the winds of the Spirit. And it is beautiful to behold as it moves quickly and beautifully over the waters, carried to God knows where. Everyone aboard was scared at first when the wind picked up and moved the boat, but now, look at you: drunk with joy.

My friends, have you taken refuge in the church as if it were a beached boat, protecting you from the storms of life. God calls you into the storms, not out of them. God calls us to go forth with the message of salvation for the world, not to be safe from the world. God is in command and calls you out of the trenches. If you stay in the trenches, paralyzed, you will eventually be overrun. The enemy will pick off your numbers one by one until no one is left.

But God is in command and calls you out where many, many will be saved -- maybe even 3000 at once -- and then your numbers will swell. They will not swell in the trenches.

So, let the wind turn this boat over and set it upright, the way it's supposed to be, and get out there and start sailing.

For it is God by His Holy Spirit who is in charge and He has one charge in mind: to point us and all men and women again, and again, and again to the one who is our Lord, who gave Himself as a sacrifice for all, the one in whom we live, Jesus Christ, to whom be glory, forever and ever.

AMEN ALLELUIA