

The 7 Lively Words of the Church
Acts 21:1-21
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Pentecost Sunday

Consider this: Members of the High School graduating class of 2010:

- Have never understood the meaning of RSVP
- Have never used a card catalog to find a book
- For them, LA Laker Magic Johnson has always tested HIV-positive
- The Green Giant has always been Shrek
- Babies have always had a Social Security number
- The European Union has always existed
- Rap music has always been mainstream
- Kevin Costner has always been “Dancing With Wolves”
- The Russian KGB has never officially existed
- “Law & Order” has always been on TV
- Michael Landon, Miles Davis, the Dallas Times Herald, Gene Roddenberry, and Dr. Seuss have always been dead.¹

This is fascinating information. It tells those of us who graduated before the Class of 2010 how quickly time passes and how rapidly change occurs.

We don't have to look very far to see how fast change comes at us.

One day I was talking to someone far more knowledgeable than me that computer technology seems to change about every 3 years. He retorted, “No, it's more like every 6 months!” We live in a time when change happens faster than we can keep up. Home land lines are being pulled. VHS has all but disappeared. Newspapers are closing. Sure, there are positive changes: The Berlin Wall is gone. No one really believed a black man would ever occupy the White House. But even positive changes add stress to our lives. It's why so many churches rail against such rapid change with

what are often called the 7 last words of the church: “We’ve never done it that way before!” When life feels like a tornado, a fire and an earthquake all wrapped into one, you grab on for dear life to what you’ve always known. You want the church, that venerable keeper of traditions and rituals, to be that rock that will never crumble against so many sea-changes in the world.

But along comes Pentecost, and what do we get? A violent wind! Tongues of fire! The Holy Spirit bouncing off the walls like kids who had too much sugar! This is no time for digging in heels. Pentecost is the time for discovering 7 new lively words for the church: “God’s about to do a new thing!” God’s shaking things up! God’s making changes! God’s on fire and wants us on fire too!

Of course, you know what we’re tempted to do! Become lion-timers and try to cool God down! “That’s okay, Lord! You’re just having a bad day!” But is Pentecost just a bad day? Is Pentecost so extraordinary it can be dismissed? Is God about maintaining the status quo, never making waves? If so, then what’s happened isn’t that society has tamed God. Society has tamed us! Maybe we assumed God is only a peacemaker, not a risk taker. I think of the words of 2 Timothy: “*God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power.*” As the Message says: “*God doesn’t want us to be shy with God’s gifts, but bold!*”²

It's said, "The only person who likes change is a wet baby!"³

Pentecost makes it clear God does too!

God knows there's plenty to be afraid of, change among them.

Pentecost is an interruption. Here are 120 folk all huddled together quaking with fear over what to do next, now Jesus is dead. They've seen what Caesar can do: Mess with Rome and you'll get strung up on a tree as well! Besides, Rome has its own aversion to change. Threaten Rome's authority and you'll be put you down, like a mad dog. So, Jesus' earliest followers were tempted to throw in the towel, to go along with Rome, to deny the resurrection and to sell out to the old patterns of war, hatred and greed.

But to these very trembling disciples comes the Holy Spirit like a mighty wind, a blaze of fire, propelling them out of their locked room to take enormous risks in proclaiming the good news of the Gospel. God sent the Holy Spirit then. God sends the Holy Spirit now. Pentecost isn't just a birthday party we celebrate once a year. Pentecost is who we are everyday: a spirit-filled people called to make changes for God, not evade them.

Many years ago the Holy Spirit showed up at René's and my door in the person of Tom Russell, a pastor and good friend who had helped me with my Doctor of Ministry project a few years before. René was on the eve of graduating from seminary and giving birth to our 2nd child (Peter); and we were torn between moving to an established church in northwest Missouri,

where we'd have enough income to care for our growing family; or to a failed new church start with only 35 people in worship on Sundays who met in a converted garage in an old house on the outskirts of Kansas City.

Tom asked us a question we will never forget. "What do you want to be doing 5 years from now?" It was one of those questions a person needs to ask, but isn't apt to ask on their own. Then Tom added, "There are risks whichever way you decide. Don't think there are no risks in playing it safe. Playing it safe has consequences too!"

It didn't take long for us to decide which way to go, despite having another mouth to feed on the way. We decided to help restart 6-year old Shawnee Park Christian Church, in Shawnee, Kansas. It remains the largest faith decision we ever made in our ministry.

This church, First Christian, Omaha, has also made significant, though not always easy, faith decisions. During our first strategic planning in 1999-2000, this church decided to start a new contemporary service: FaithPoint. Many churches have split over such a decision. And, at first it was scary. But next year FaithPoint will be 10 years old, because enough people in this church were willing to set aside their own negative feelings about contemporary worship to do what was best for this church.

Then, 18 months ago, this congregation took another extraordinary step in faith in calling a third ordained person in order to fulfill our vision of

becoming a multi-generational church. This too was not done lightly. The American economy was already on the brink of the biggest recession since the Great Depression. Warning signs were everywhere. But here we are with a new young adult Visionaries Sunday School class, planning our second Urban Poverty Day of Action and Service, and expanding a renewed wedding ministry because of this decision. These things could not happen unless a lot of people were willing to risk change rather than fall back to that old default position: “We’ve never done it that way before.”

Spiritual strategic planning is now a part of our church’s DNA. We eagerly await further evidence “God’s about to do a new thing!”

But we mustn’t forget how easy it is to fall back to safe, familiar ways, which comfort and reassure. It’s why we need to know on this Pentecost Sunday—officially the last Sunday of the Easter season—that we can live as Easter/Pentecost people and let God do a risky, new thing through us. After all, a church isn’t a “Day Care Center,” it’s a “Dare Care Center.”⁴

Leonard Sweet puts it this way: A caterpillar doesn’t just grow into a butterfly. A caterpillar must undergo molting and metamorphosis in which the insect’s morphology is entirely rearranged. How ironic that in today’s vernacular, that word “cocoon” has come to mean exactly the opposite of what it means to a caterpillar. A cocoon isn’t safe. A cocoon is where a

caterpillar risks all—where it enters total chaos, where it undergoes total rebuilding, where it dies to one way of locomotion and life and is born to a new way of living. A cocoon is where a caterpillar allows itself to disintegrate into a blob of gelatinous liquid without structure or identity so it can emerge with sharpened sensory perceptions and breathtaking beauty.

Only in taking the risk of entering that inert pupa can the caterpillar go from dormancy to potency, from ugliness to beauty. This is the reason why the butterfly is an authentic symbol of resurrection! Not because it's cute, but because it risks dying to be born to new life.⁵ This is what Easter, Pentecost, the entire Christian year, the Christian faith, and the Christian church are all about: dying to the old self to become something new and better for God.

It's why we can pray this Pentecost Prayer (as I invite you to do):

Flame-dancing Spirit, come,
Sweep us off our feet and
Dance us through our days.
Surprise us with your rhythms;
Dare us to try new steps, explore
New patterns and new partnerships;
Release us from old routines
To swing in abandoned joy and
Fearful adventure. And
In the intervals, rest us
In your still center. Amen.⁶

¹From Google Search, "*If you were born before 1991*"

²Timothy 1:7

³Mark Twain, *Leadership Vol. 15, no 3*, found in *PreachingToday.com*, Keyword: 2 Cor. 5:17

⁴Leonard Sweet, "Dare Care," *Homiletics*, April-June 1997, p. 29.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Jane Morley, from Women Included, London SPCK, 1991, 44; as found in *Resources for Preaching and Worship*, Pp, 153-4.