

We Need Revival (Pentecost Revisited)

August 10, 2025 + West Vancouver United Church + The Rev. Rob Shearer + Revelation 21 and Acts 2

Let us pray in song – join me if you know the tune...

It's a great honour to be here once again at West Van United. *[pause]* And I gotta say – it's a brave thing to hand the guest preacher a proverbial blank cheque; to preach on what they believe the Holy Spirit is saying to the church for today.

Now, when Simon first invited me to preach on what the church might need to hear at this time what first came to mind was: *we need revival!* I mean, why not, what could possibly go off the rails with that topic, right?

I mean, what could go wrong in a place like a United Church in West Vancouver when we speak of wild tongues and fire and wind and dreams and visions? What could go wrong as we recall our founding story which broke the dividing walls of age and gender and social status where Holy Spirit moved in ways that not only transformed our forebears in faith - and not just for their sake, but for the very sake of God's world.

A United Church minister friend of mine likes to say that when we say "Come Holy Spirit" that those are dangerous words, that we should have yellow warning tape everywhere around the church – for we are inviting in God that so powerful, so transformative to our status quo, that we'd better get out of the way.

And if you're one of those who are a little nervous about all that emotional and mystical stuff, I'll admit that I, your preacher, am as well - and maybe that's ok. Maybe it's ok for this preacher to preach something that will rattle us all just a wee bit this morning.

With that, I hope you'll forgive me as I dig a little into our Methodist roots - and allow us, together, to journey even further back to collective past for a moment. In doing that, I'm reminded of the words of the great Bob Marley who sang: "If you know history / then you'd know where you're coming from". So let's take this moment to re-member where we've come from, and to be reminded of some of our founding Story. To buckle in together to lean back deep into our roots as a Jesus Movement – to go back 9 weeks in liturgical time - or some 1900 years or so in chronological time to revisit, again, the story of the birth of our movement – the story of Pentecost. *[pause]*

Our own origin story as beloved community happens not in beautiful buildings like this one, not with paid clergy or staff, or fancy vestments - nor with soaring glorious music as we've just heard (which I love! Thank you!) - but in a small room– today's scripture says it's a house - where this terrified shaking group of ragamuffin followers of the Way as it was then called, the Jesus Way, have gathered to regroup after the disorienting events of good Friday and Easter and Jesus' ascension.

The story goes on to speak of the promised coming of the Holy Spirit; of bizarre and strange things – of a rushing wind, fire dancing over their heads - and speaking in other languages; stuff so weird that onlookers, with no other frame of reference, accused this tiny sect of early morning drunkenness. The passage goes on noting that young and old, male and female, free & slave will be the ones called to invoke visions & dreams. Radical stuff in a culture that was built on slavery and so deeply patriarchal & ageist to its core.

Speaking of younger folks having visions and prophesying, I didn't come up with this sense that 'we need revival' on my own. it's something that I keep hearing from folks who are younger than me – here in the United Church and elsewhere – and as I hear it

repeated, I think we're all best to take note. In this time of exhaustion and brokenness, of fragmentation and polarization – and as things fall apart all around – where it feels like even the moon is bleeding - more than ever, we, beloved community, need revival.

And in case you're wondering just what I mean by revival, I'll draw on the words of The Rev. William Pollard, Chairman of the British Columbia District of the Methodist Church, who in an 1874 spoke of congregations where a "power ... attends their prayers and experiences, sufficiently indicates that they come from hearts regenerated by Divine graces." I wonder what it might mean for us today to pray to invoke some of that latent "Holy Ghost" fire that inspired our forebears; perhaps even those who worshipped at the Methodist Church where it stood down on the 2200 block of Fulton Avenue.

The United Church historian Philis Airhart speaks of this revival tendency in our collective past, speaking of: "Sunday services as well as... "protracted meetings" where revival services were scheduled for a period of days or even weeks." Imagine that – wanting to go to church for weeks! [where even]... the quarterly and annual business meetings of Methodism were ... the scene of revivals. Summer camp meetings provided another setting for revival preaching... [all of this, she goes on to say]... indelibly marked the religious identity of its adherents. In particular the conversion experience, [a change of life] associated with revival..."

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, one of the precursors to our own United Church, who is often credited with being the parent a lot of modern revivalism had his own experience of conversion. Years into his ministry as a dejected Anglian priest as he heard a reading of Luther's commentary on Romans read aloud in a public square and declared that his heart was strangely warmed and his life turned around.

Later, he prayed this prayer for a church that, *quote* "moves forth in mission and creates authentic community in which each person can be unleashed through the empowerment of the Spirit to fulfill God's creational intentions." He went on to found a movement whose DNA, I believe, is still very much alive albeit sometimes deeply under the surface, in our United Church of Canada.

But a caution. Since I chose this subject, 'revival' has been in the news. And in this, I want to be clear to not confuse what I'm talking about with some news stories you might have seen lately. You see, true revival is not about deliberately provoking the culture and making ourselves out to be martyrs, nor is it about trying to make the state enforce our values. True revival is not white nationalism, nor targeting immigrants for deportation or incarceration - nor does it suppress the rights of LGBT folks. True revival does not gloat in the starving and bombing of populations nor put one flag higher above another.

True revival, church, is always matched with a care for those most in need. True revival most always comes first from the margins and doesn't seek power over others.

The early Methodist revival movement was known not just for their tent meetings calling folks into both a lived and tangible experience of the living God - but also for their witness to human rights dignity – they opposed slavery and fought for women's emancipation *and* also for animal rights - they founded the SPCA - *and* to care for God's creation - not to mention being the foundation for the modern 12-step movement. Wesley even defended Thomas Blair, a gay man jailed on death row for having a same sex partner. And, remember, this is in the 18th century.

A later revival, the so-called second great awakening in the 19th century had altar calls which had folks come forward not just to receive or renew a commitment to following Jesus but, at the same time, to sign up for one of the great movements against the oppressions of the time – namely, to rise against slavery or against abuse of alcohol leading to domestic violence.

The 1906 Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles was, at its onset, a racially integrated pacifist movement which had women preachers & prophetesses some 30 years before we in the United Church would, with some reluctance, would open that same door. *pause*

A tangible experience of God's grace is what Wesley prayed for. For Jesus' people to move beyond a safe faith in order to fulfill God's creational intentions. A way of being that that transforms both the individual and the world. Revival. Powerful.

And even as I speak of the power of revival, I want to remind us that if there's one thing that I hope we've should learn from our past, as your guest speaker underlined last week, is that any of our traditions baptised in colonialism have deep shadows that need exorcising. I've read of how that those revivals in the 1860s here in BC were marred by our own colonial frameworks –selling out to power & our own cultural blinders which stunted the work of God's Spirit. And that's an important warning as we pray for revival.

And with that, I'm certainly not proposing we try to go back to 1750 or 1860 or 1906 – nor even to the baby boom in 1960, when every Sunday School had at least 500 children, right? These movements, as great as they were, also had their shadows. So we're left to ask: *how is God's Spirit calling us to a revival here and now?*

Our scripture today paints this vivid picture of our origins as the beloved community of Jesus experiencing the very first revival, noting that: "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people."

Pastah J, an African-American pastor from Chicago notes that the miracle of Acts 2 is not so much the tongues or flames or wind - but is in the fact that they actually held all things in common and lived a radical life without killing each other. That they were able to live a life of trust and love so rooted in the power of God's Holy Spirit and, from that, that they gave the excess away to those in need. What a witness!

Our forebears in faith, at their best, were so alive from the experience of Jesus' resurrection and the power of the Spirit that had come upon them, they were willing to give their lives entirely over to a bigger Story of hope.

And so it is this morning I'd suggest that the Spirit is reminding us, that *we* too need a Story that is greater than the market, than the dual poles of liberal and conservative that have dominated modernity. We need a connection to the mystical, the spiritual; a story that God, in the power of the Holy Spirit, will really make all things new, realizing that when we've come to the end of our ropes, be that personally and collectively, that the very Creator of the universe has a bigger vision for the flourishing of all creation!

We are reminded today that we are part of a Story of a God who risked humanity to become one of us and who conquered death and rose again. I would suggest to you today as fascisms rise, as genocides happen, as wars and rumors of wars and fires fill the headlines, we all need a bigger Story of Love – and now is not the time to give that story over to those who use it for hate and exclusion.

And so it is that our Story is one where we humbly proclaim that another world is possible. What better time than now to testify what Jesus has done in our lives, to tell our stories and sing our songs of praise – telling of that big story where God’s home will be among mortals. Where God will dwell with us; God will wipe every tear away, when death will be no more; mourning & crying & pain will be no more. This is good news!

If we don’t have *that* as our gospel truth, if we no longer trust in God’s redemptive story for creation - what hope do we convey to a world where greed and death and violence seem to have the final say?

So it is that the Spirit reminds us that this is precisely why we gather. I think one of the things that we as church can do, that so few others can, is to call us to this bigger Story and to a power, a Holy Spirit power, that is greater than our own. Sure, we can be a community of belonging and this is good. Sure, we can be agents for social justice and presence in the world. As we should. But I would suggest to you all this morning that those things can happen in many places and in many cases, they can be done better than us. *[pause]*

So it is that we need a revival to recall us to this Story. For some of us, our formation in the rational age makes the wildness of revival and difficult to engage. For others, we’ve been hurt or manipulated, or seen the vile politics of some so-called revivals. I get that. Even so, I believe that we need to live into our birthright and not let the haters steal the language of revival, never mind hijacking the Jesus story of liberation & redemption!

In case you’re wondering just how this revival might come to be — I believe that it already is: On a given Sunday morning, I’ll catch the livestream worship of the Ghana Methodist United Church in Toronto, one of the longer-established African diasporic UCC Congregations many of which are now popping up across the country. Their worship involves all-night revival meetings, fiery preaching, passionate singing, praise and dancing. Sometimes, in this striking moment of intercultural expression, the women of the congregation wear Ghanaian dresses adorned with The United Church of Canada’s logo. This ain’t your grandma’s United Church. And that can be scary for some of us.

I see it in our church plants where young and often queer lovers of Jesus are proclaiming that God changes hearts, that another world is possible – invoking an alternative Jesus-focused imagination - that the story we see unfolding in the news is not the final story. I see it as queer refugees from Africa gather and praise, or inclusive Farsi folk are forming Spirit-filled Christian communities even within our United Church.

I see it as leaders, young and old, queer and straight, and of every tongue and tribe and nation are having visions and dreaming dreams anew opening their hearts to be warmed by God’s Spirit and calling others to do the same.

And I’ll conclude with this word: The great thing about revival is that it is a grace. It’s not something we work or strive toward or that comes of our own work. Like our own healing, redemption & salvation, it’s God’s sheer generosity and gift. All we need to do is pray come Holy Spirit – Veni Sancte Spiritus - and wait expectantly.

I’ll end, then, with grace on our hearts first calling us into a brief moment of silence... to breathe and to pray *come holy spirit*... and then, invoking Wesley’s admonition for us to sing lustily and with good courage – so - let us and sing together...

Aamen...