

**A Joyful Noise**  
May 28, 2023  
Rev. Ann Eichhorn



**Readings**

Acts 2: 1-4, 11

When the feast of Pentecost came, they were in one place. Without warning there was a sound like a strong wind, gale force—no one could tell where it came from. It filled the whole building. Then like wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks, and they started speaking in a number of different languages, as the Spirit prompted them. Then when they heard, one after another their own mother tongues being spoken, they were thunderstruck. They're speaking our languages, describing God's mighty works!

Psalm 100, verses 1, 4, 5

Paraphrased from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*

On your feet now—applaud God! Bring a gift of laughter, sing yourselves into (God's) presence. Enter with the password, "Thank you." Make yourselves at home, talking praise. Thank (God), worship (God), for God is sheer beauty, all generous in love, loyal always and ever.

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Today marks the beginning of the liturgical season of Pentecost which begins the seventh Sunday or 50 days after Easter, and runs until the first Sunday in Advent. Pentecost is a story about a miracle. The first reading you heard today is about people gathered in Jerusalem coming from all parts of the surrounding areas to celebrate the Feast of Weeks – what was originally the second of three pilgrim festivals of the Jewish religious calendar. The Feast of Weeks was an agricultural festival, marking the beginning of the wheat harvest.

We are told that three thousand people were gathered on that special day when they heard and experienced something that moved them to become energized, engaged, and later baptized, and committed to a mission to live and spread the teachings of Jesus based on love and serving others. This event is acknowledged as the beginning of Christianity when people gathered with a belief in God and a commitment Jesus' way of being a loving presence, and who began a mission to live a different life, despite the dangers connected with doing so.

In thinking about this Pentecost story and the “noise” connected with it, I am aware that noise is usually defined as something heard that is unpleasant. But what was clearly recorded about that particular “noise” was that it became a joyful one, not something which made the people fearful. The story reminds me of a couple of experiences Bill and I had when we took several UCC groups to Germany for a week’s celebration of the German church festival known as Kirchentag (church days). These were huge events usually centered in one of the big cities like Berlin, Frankfurt and Munich. People came from all over Germany and from other countries where they had sister church relationships such as with our denomination and with churches in Mill Valley and with CCC, or were connected to German church-supported mission projects in places like South Africa.

The Kirchentag is usually held in convention halls where the programs and activities take place ten hours a day. There are presentations on various social justice actions and mission projects and their results, worship resources that can be shared, explorations of different kinds of Christian education models, youth engagement activities, and workshops on topics such as grief and family counseling. The list of possibilities seemed almost endless to those of us who attended. We met every day to identify who was taking what opportunities so we could have a broader span of experiences and then share some of what we learned with each other at the end of the day. This was the context in which one of the groups we took over comprised of young, diverse college students presented their Peace Academy workshop on racism in the United States and how to encounter it. Our group was in turn introduced to the delegation from South Africa dealing with their “at home” realities as well. It was an interesting eye-opening experience.

There were local parishes that opened their doors as places to rest; they also provided evening concerts. As you walked around town, often standing on the street corners were church member brass bands or string quartets playing church hymns, or providing easy-to-learn tunes for folks to sing, some of which became now familiar religious chants which we brought back here for folks to sing as well, such as the “Alleluia” that we like to sing. Wherever they happened, these programs and workshops and musical gatherings provided many wonderful insights and meaningful conversations. Our groups came back to the U.S. energized, refreshed, and enthusiastically eager to share their experiences with others.

In addition to the convention hall opportunities at the end of each Kirchentag week, a celebratory service was held in a large soccer stadium. During the years we were there, attendance at that closing ceremony was often between one hundred to one hundred forty thousand people.

How many of you have been to an event where someone started a “wave” – a group action that had you rising from your seat and raising your hands and your voice as the wave and a noise came toward you and then moved past you? In the midst of this experience, you know something is happening because you can hear and see it coming. It’s usually a joyful experience, and probably something like the experience people had at that original Pentecost gathering. It’s also much like the experience of a Kirchentag, where out of nowhere you can suddenly hear people singing as “Alleluia,” or other catchy tunes that could be harmonized or sung in rounds. People just stop and join in, then move on when it is over. “Alleluia” is a song that can be sung in any language, and it’s heard throughout a Kirchentag week. When you sit in a large stadium-type building and hear over a hundred thousand people singing *anything* together, it’s awesome!

Back for a moment to the miracle of that first Pentecost. Along with the noise that got the people's attention, they were also hearing the message of Jesus being preached and seeing people being impacted by expressions of love, caring, empathy, and compassion. They felt God's presence and were moved to commitment and action. Remember, this was not long after Jesus was killed and it was still a dangerous time for his followers. It's been described as a "pregnant" time, one in which something formerly unknown was brought into being, a time when the people gathered were moved to action, committed themselves to a new future, and stepped into unfamiliar territory.

So it's the season of Pentecost, 2023. Many questions exist today. Where and how are the mighty works of God celebrated in our community, our society, our world? How is religion playing a role in dividing us as a nation, a global community; how is it attempting to unite us? Is Christianity being valued and taught as a supposedly superior option that requires the exclusion those who don't fit a particular model? Or is it valued and taught as a gentle way of living that strives to become as inclusive and accepting as possible, especially to those we don't know loving and caring for one another? Does it open minds and hearts to the presence of God everywhere?

If we focus on the "joyful noise" that came with that first Pentecost, we can ask ourselves today what we might be joyful about. Last Sunday we experienced joy through the gift of music and a good sermon about the gifts of women and the contributions they make in our lives. We can celebrate stories of healings, people responding to the needs of others, new members deciding to join us, community efforts to care for one another and the needs in our larger world. We can celebrate the beauty of the greening that follows rainstorms and snow melts, the arrival of spring, the miracle of water after years of drought. So many joys!

As Bill and I leave tomorrow for our time in the refreshing woods, we want you to know what a pleasure it has been and still is to serve you all as your bridge ministers. We appreciate beyond words that you all "came back" as we continued to move out of the isolation we experienced with COVID. We welcome and are grateful for the renewed vigor with which so many of you have given of your time, skills, and efforts to not only keep the necessary things going, but to help us all imagine and communicate new ways we might serve as individuals and a community.

We have one plea: *Please don't disappear!* Extraordinary effort has been made to gather an exciting group of Sunday morning worship service presenters and musicians. All Sundays are slotted until we get back on August 12<sup>th</sup>. We think you will find that what our guest ministers and presenters have to say will be informative, insightful, imaginative. They will be adding to our thinking as a community about possibilities that lie ahead. Please support them with your presence and your appreciation of their willingness to be in conversation with you about the work of being an active faith community. Bless you all. Amen.