

## "All Together in One Place"

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*When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.*

*Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs -- in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."*

*<sup>14</sup>But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. <sup>15</sup>Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. <sup>16</sup>No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: <sup>17</sup>'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. <sup>18</sup>Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. <sup>19</sup>And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. <sup>20</sup>The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. <sup>21</sup>Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'* (Acts 2:1-21)

I would venture to say most of us agree that one of the central aspects of worship is reverence... that, in worship, we "revere" the sovereignty and majesty of God. It gets a little trickier, however, when we start trying to define what reverence looks like. Or, more appropriately for today's passage, what reverence **sounds** like.

For centuries, one of the assumptions we have made as the body of Christ is that reverence is intimately related to **quiet**. While not all quiet is reverent, we might say that all reverence is quiet. This value is obvious in how we teach our children -- at a very early age -- that sitting in worship is a quiet activity. When I was younger, if I turned the pages in a book too loudly, my mom would gently but firmly put her hand on the book in a way that made it clear I needed to quiet down. These lessons are rooted in a respect for others, and kids absorb them at a young age. A case in point is a little girl who was asked this question point blank in Sunday school. When her teacher asked the class why it is good to be quiet in church, her hand shot up, and with the confidence of an experienced worshiper, she replied "Because people are sleeping."<sup>1</sup>

But in all seriousness, there is a

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.jaredstory.com/church\\_children.html](http://www.jaredstory.com/church_children.html)

Christian ethic at work here – the conviction that it is right and good for us to refrain from disturbing others as they attempt to listen to God's voice in worship. Because excessive noise might be a stumbling block to others, we are taught that it is to be avoided.

I wonder, however, if these ethical lessons are about more than the way we listen to God. They may also reflect an assumption we are making about how God speaks to us. It's as if we think God can only speak to us in a whisper, so that if we are not really, really quiet, we might miss what God is saying to us.

The experience of the prophet Elijah actually supports this idea. When Elijah was at his lowest point, when he was convinced that all of creation was against him and he had not one friend in the world, God knew that the prophet needed a divine word of guidance and encouragement. "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD," a voice said to Elijah, "for the LORD is about to pass by." Before Elijah moved at all, "There was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD." But Elijah didn't move, because the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind, there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake there was a great fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. Finally, after the fire, there was something very faint. Older versions call the sound "a still small voice," but most scholars believe a better translation of the Hebrew may be "a sound of sheer silence." That faint sound, the sound of nothingness, is what finally got Elijah on his feet. He wrapped his face in his cloak, went out and stood at the entrance of the cave to greet his God and receive his instructions.<sup>2</sup>

Those in the Quaker tradition have built their entire conception of worship around a quiet, expectant listening for God's "still small voice." They take literally the Lord's advice in the psalms to "Be still and know that I am God."<sup>3</sup> "We meet in plain, unadorned rooms," they say, "because we feel that, in such places, we will be less distracted from that small still voice... We have no prearranged prayers, readings, sermons, hymns, or musical orchestrations because we wait for God's leadings and power in our lives."<sup>4</sup> All of this, I would venture, aligns with our shared and assumed definition of what it means to be "reverent." In many ways, we too shape our worship around the idea that the Holy Spirit moves in quiet and solitude -- that God's voice is meek and easily missed. To make room for the reverence, we begin with quiet.

Notably, however, the actual definition of reverence doesn't have anything to do with sound or the lack thereof. Reverence is simply the "deep respect for someone or something." And even more notably, this Pentecost scripture reminds us that the birth of the church was anything but quiet. It was actually very noisy.

It begins with what we might call a "Spirit tornado." The scripture says that the believers were all together in one place, all packed into one house, and "*suddenly there came from heaven a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house...*" There does not seem to have been an actual wind throwing furniture around the house -- just the mighty sound of a hurricane passing through. Then that racket was replaced with the din of everyone talking at once in Spirit-induced praise, a sound so loud that it spilled out beyond the house and drew a huge crowd to the dwelling. In native languages from all over the known world, people were raising a sound cloud that spoke of God's awesome power. According to scripture, we have to say that the church was not born in quiet reflection, but in resounding, uproarious, ear-splitting noise.

So, on Pentecost, the Lord did not speak with a still, small voice. On that day, the Lord's speech was more like the voice of God in Psalm 29. There, the voice of the Lord "*thunders*" with power. It is so "*full of majesty*" that it "*breaks the cedars of Lebanon.*" "*The voice of the LORD flashes*

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Kings 19:9-13

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 46:10

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.quaker.org/langleyhill/values.html>

*forth flames of fire,"* the psalm says. It "*shakes the wilderness,"* it "*causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare.*"<sup>5</sup> In short, God's voice can be anything but quiet, and the only response to that kind of divine power is reverence and awe.

On this Pentecost Sunday, my point is that reverent worship can be both. It can be quiet reflection in a sacred space -- a peaceful waiting for the still, small voice of God. But reverence can also be found in the melodic squeal of Highland bagpipes, which mystically connect us to our ancestors in the faith.

God can speak to us in times of silent confession and prayer, and also in powerful anthems lifted by a choir accompanied by an organ with all the stops pulled.

We can taste and see the grace of God as a tray of bread is quietly passed to us in the sanctuary, but the full power of that holy meal can also be served to us in a noisy dining hall full of tables, as a brother or sister looks us in the eye and says "This is the body of Christ, offered for you."

Sometimes all mortal flesh should keep silent, and sometimes we can encounter the divine in a "noisy offering" of clanking change in metal buckets, as laughing children engaged in worship run up and down the aisles of our worship space.

In this sanctuary, we can listen for God's voice in the quiet moments before the prelude begins, or we can recognize it in the organized chaos of the Passing of the Peace, as the community of faith lifts its collective voice in messages of peace and blessing, each of us speaking in our way to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

One of the messages of Pentecost is that the Holy Spirit blows where it will. We can neither control it nor contain it. We cannot dictate how it comes to us or what it says to us. Just as God's voice can sometimes be small and still, and sometimes loud enough to shake the cedars and rock the caverns of the ocean, so it is that our worship need not always be the same. As Pentecost people gathered together in one place, as people who are truly seeking the blessings and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in a community of faith, we should be open to the mystery and power of it all.

And if we are, the noise of our praise might just draw a crowd to our door.

Thanks be to God. **Amen.**

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<sup>5</sup> Psalm 29:3-9