

“Flames, Waves and Stones”  
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby  
Central Presbyterian Church  
May 11, 2008  
Scripture: Joshua 4:1-9 and Acts 2:1-21

Today is Pentecost, the birth of the church. We studied this passage about the founding of the church last week in confirmation. Keanan did a great job in reading from the Saint John’s version of the Bible today – not an easy task. Last week we took turns reading and together struggled with the names of all the nationalities represented in Jerusalem that day when the Spirit rushed into the room “with a sound like the rush of a violent wind” (Acts 2:2) “Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphlyia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs” and all could hear and understand in their own languages when the Spirit came (Acts 2:9-11).

I think a lot about Central when I hear this story of people gathering from all over the known world, speaking in different languages and bearing different cultural traditions. That is how, according to the Bible, the church begins. In a gathering of people from all over the world, “speaking about God’s deeds of power” (Acts 2:11) in their own languages and being able to understand one another. That was the church at its birth and that is the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But it is not easy to be a multicultural church. It is not easy to be a multicultural church, because the gospel always comes wrapped in culture. And it is not easy to blend traditions, or even always be aware of traditions that are important to some folks.

We recently held an Inquirers’ Class – a class for those who want to learn more about Central. One of my favorite parts of the class is hearing the stories of the faith journeys of how people end up coming to Central. The stories are fascinating and wide-ranging. From people who have been going to church all their lives, to those who realize that as parents, they want a church that will help keep them grounded in a caring community.

I enjoy hearing in the class what people expect to find and experience in any church they could consider to be home. Ayoko said that she has come to expect at Central that worship will be exactly sixty minutes, no longer than sixty-five. But in Togo, where she comes from, worship starts at nine o’clock and goes until noon. One or two o’clock if there is communion or a baptism! It is not easy to be a multicultural church! We have different appreciations for worship styles. Some prefer drums and dancing and others pipe organs. That is the context we face in planning worship when we hear people say they want to sing “familiar” hymns.

The confirmation class when we studied this passage smiled when they heard the accusation about the Spirit-filled scene of multiple languages. Some sneered, “They are filled with new wine.” Peter’s defense that they were not drunk because it was “only nine o’clock in the morning” brought laughter. It is helpful to remember that ever since Pentecost, the church in bringing together people from all cultures speaking different

languages, the church from the beginning raised suspicions. We are in the midst of doing something that is not easy.

Three years ago, on Pentecost, we had an amazing celebration as I was installed as a Designated Pastor here at Central. It was really an amazing day, in hindsight. We wondered and worried if anyone would come to an afternoon service of the presbytery. And we had a wonderful day, with supporters and clergy colleagues and a great turnout of members at both services that day in witness to hope. To hope that the church can be reborn for a new day. Witness to hope that a church with an average age of more than sixty could reach out to new generations. One speaker began in Spanish. Another, the pastor of the "Church of All Nations" encouraged us to explore multiple cultures.

That was three years ago. The change we have navigated and the growth we have seen has been nothing short of surprising. Many of you were here on that installation day three years ago; others had not even heard of Central yet. We have a long way to go to be the strong and healthy church that is needed right here for this time. But we have much to celebrate as well.

As you may have heard, the Session will be recommending to the congregation that I be elected as your "permanent" installed pastor in a special meeting in September. Some of you have wondered what I thought about that recommendation and I am very pleased, and excited about a new set of challenges as we begin to contemplate a future together. That is still a ways off, and there will be time for questions and debate.

Today is confirmation Sunday at Central. And we celebrate with the eight youth who have participated in the Confirmation class this year and were received by the Session as new members. What do you do to celebrate a momentous occasion? Prayer, certainly. Rituals that bind us together are important, so we will celebrate the sacrament of communion.

Confirmation is a rite of passage. An acknowledgement of maturity. No longer mere kids, these eight confirmands are understood by the church to have the ability to state their beliefs and commitments for themselves. Confirmation is a crossing over – for them, and for this church.

And so our story from Joshua seems quite appropriate for this day. You may remember that Moses was the great leader who pushed and pushed Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, demanding that Pharaoh, "let my people go." Pharaoh, like all slave-holding rulers, was not about to give up his source of free labor. And God kept encouraging Moses, to demand freedom for the Israelites. Finally, with the assistance of ten divine plagues, Pharaoh had had enough. Away the Israelites went, fleeing the oppression and slavery. Before they were far gone, Pharaoh changed his mind, and sent his army in hot pursuit. In a dramatic miraculous event, Moses stuck his staff in the Red Sea and the waters parted and the Israelites escaped on dry land.

But it is not easy to let go of the old ways. After escaping Egypt, the people found new things about which to complain. Not enough food. Not enough water. Who did Moses think he was, leading them? It would have been better for us to die in slavery in Egypt, they said bitterly, at least there we had food to eat. It takes time to find release from old harmful patterns. So they wandered in the wilderness for a long time. Forty years. The entire Exodus generation had died and so had Moses. And then

Joshua was appointed leader. And he would be the one who would lead them into the Promised Land.

And so they gathered, the wilderness behind them and Egypt now long in their past. The Promised Land stretched out in front of them. The River Jordan stood in their way. And God gave Joshua instructions about how they should cross. It was a day not to be forgotten, the day that the Israelites crossed over the Jordan into the Promised Land. And, once again, the crossing was nothing short of miraculous. The priests carried the ark of the covenant, that carried the scrolls of the Torah. And when the feet of the priests touched the water, the waters flowing from above were cut off (see Joshua 3).

Then, after the people had crossed the Jordan, they engaged in a ritual to remember this day. One person from each tribe was selected to go back into the river, and pick up a stone and bring them into the camp. Later Joshua set the twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan, right where the feet of the priests stood. They were to be a reminder of what happened that day. A reminder of all that had happened before the crossing into the Promised Land.

Today we will be given a stone. A stone in which to remember the events of today. But also for you to remember what is happening in your lives. A stone to keep in your pocket, or by the side of your bed, to remember that you are part of a larger community of faith. A stone to remember that there are others who will be here to support you when you are in need, and challenge you when you wonder what God wants from you. Today we celebrate the birth of the church, and a rebirth here at Central. Remember this day. Amen.