

June 4, 2017
Pentecost, Year A
Acts 2:1-21
The Rev. Carenda Baker

SIGNS. Every day life floods our senses with signs. Signs of contentment: A smile. Humming a tune. Purring from the cat curled on your lap. Tail wagging and thumping from the dog coming to greet us at the door. The baby's cooing, his lying comfortably, body relaxed in restful repose after being fed. Signs - giving direction: Traffic lights. Blinking cross walk signs. Route 81 South. Chambersburg – 35 miles. Signs of warning: Caution - road work ahead. The "Mr.Yuck" stickers alerting to potential danger. "Speed limit enforced by radar". During the football or baseball game, hands deftly signal to communicating the next strategy that will strike out the batter, or guide the receiver in a weaving pattern down the field to complete the pass and score a touchdown. Daily we see and hear them, read about them, talk about them. Signs. Plenty of times we ignore them. Other times we lose sleep worrying about them. SIGNS. Of change. Of physical and emotional distress. Illness and health. Signs of new life. Of hope and possibility.

You might even have your own personal sign that reorients you and reminds you to pay attention. The appearance and sound of geese in flight does that for me. Geese in flight are the reassuring sign of God's active presence. They seem to appear when I didn't even know I needed a sign, wasn't looking for it or expecting it. Always they grab my attention. In the Celtic tradition, the wild goose is the symbol of the Holy Spirit.

The disciples had no clue what signs they needed to be watching for. Before he left, Jesus had simply promised them that another Advocate would come to be with them. One to lead, teach, inspire, and empower them to be his witnesses, to continue his work. They were in Jerusalem praying and waiting. Waiting for a sign.

They are gathered together on the Day of Pentecost – and "Whoosh!" – the first sign appears, blowing through the place, the felt force of wind sounding like a train rumbling down the tracks toward them. And then a second sign, little tongues of flame licking just above each of their heads, like the hot, holy breath of God. And then in a chaotic, cacophonous chorus, a roomful of voices that sound like a United Nations gathering, each one is able to hear a message in their own native language. And the message in all that mayhem? The message is about God's mighty deeds of power.

The Holy Spirit's appearing is the very same presence of power and authority that they had seen and heard in Jesus' teaching, healing, challenging, and serving. Deeds of power. The same life force present through Jesus' life and death, and in his

resurrection. This unexpected Holy Spirit is the energy of pure love that won't be tied down and cannot be contained, but moves at will to call forth what humanity has no power to create by itself: life, truth, hope, goodness, wisdom, self-sacrifice, forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace. This spiritual force ripples out in waves from Jerusalem to the rest of the world over centuries. Our gathering together here today is a sign pointing to that ancient Pentecostal power that marked the beginning of God's people in mission. Just the beginning, and nowhere near the ending.

Two brief thoughts about SIGNS. In just a few moments we will administer to Linus the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. We call them Sacraments, Baptism and Eucharist - these very tangible, earthy things – water, oil, bread, and wine – ***outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace***, as the Book of Common Prayer defines sacrament. Matter matters in God's scheme of creation! Earthy things that we see, taste, touch and handle. Sacraments are sign acts that carry the weight of the story of God's power to create – to craft new life and a new identity. Power to give clear purpose, direction, and deep meaning to life. Tremendous power that fashions us - flawed, wandering, anxious, selfish people into a community which promises to help each other live more fully into the common way of the life of Jesus. The way of servanthood and non-violent love. Sacraments are gifts to remind us of the eternal love we have received through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. And to remind us that Christ's Spirit lives in us and is at work in us, whether we recognize it or not. Are convinced of it or not. This is a power we don't understand so much as it is a power that requires our trust.

Every time we share the Sacraments we are changed, because the work of the Holy Spirit is to steadily change us, to mold and shape us so that we look and act more and more like Christ's Body - Christ's living eyes, hands, feet, and heart reaching out to touch and heal the world. The Spirit works in each of us individually, harnessing the distinct gifts, passions, talents and personalities we have been given by God. And the Spirit's work is to shape us collectively, into a community of Jesus' disciples. Mary and Corey, and Beverly and Erin will make promises today to show and tell and model for Linus as he grows the loving way of Jesus. And the rest of us will promise to support them in every way we can to do this marvelous, mysterious, and challenging work of parenting and mentoring, because the truth is that none of us can be Christians off alone somewhere by ourselves. No parents can raise a child to embrace the Christian faith and its rigorous life all by themselves. If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a faith community to raise a disciple of Christ, a child of God.

So, this is my Pentecost question for all of us: how are we doing at paying attention and recognizing the signs of God's active presence in our lives? I mentioned in last week's sermon that I had been in a nasty car accident in 2013, when I was in Tennessee

completing my Anglican studies year. At the church where I was working, St. Francis of Assisi Episcopal Church in Ooltewah, outside of Chattanooga, there was a family who attended regularly with two young children. The older of the children was a son Noah, who was four years old. Noah was quite shy and sensitive. He wanted his parents and church to teach him how to pray. The week after my car accident that news was shared with the congregation. Noah's parents explained to him that I wasn't there because I had been in a car accident, but that I was not hurt. The next week when I returned to church Noah's father Bruce pulled me aside and told me that one evening that week Noah had said to his parents, "I know why Miss Carenda wasn't hurt in that accident. God was hugging her." I was stunned. This declaration of faith from a four year old boy! I went to Noah and told him that he was exactly right. When the car which had rolled down a slight embankment ended right side up, there was silence and a mysterious calm that seemed to enfold me. I don't think it was shock. I never lost consciousness, and suffered only minor cuts on my arm. And I don't think I imagined what I felt. I can't explain why I had been protected but I believe I was.

The signs of God's active presence are there for us every day, if we pay attention. The signs don't often come in such dramatic ways as walking away from a serious accident or being touched by tongues of living flame. But God's love and life fills all and is in all. God's love is not a passive, non-committal thing that comes and goes on a whim, according to how God might be feeling that day. God is bound to us in a forever committed, loving relationship for all of this life and into the next. It is the Spirit's work to help us trust that, to help us see and recognize the signs, however and whenever they come. It might be an unexpected letter or phone call from a friend. A word of advice spoken at just the right time. Sudden clarity to make a weighty decision. A moment of consolation, or peace or joy when we're outdoors in nature, or in silent prayer, singing in the shower or shopping in the grocery store.

Not only do we need to pay attention and look for the signs. The promises and actions we offer here today mean that we will be sent by the Spirit into the world to be living signs of Christ our Lord. Signs of love and goodness. Signs of reconciliation and justice. Signs of healing and hope.

We welcome Linus into a new worldwide family today, God's family, the Body of Christ. We need each other to worship and pray, to help us learn how to live out these promises. We need each other to celebrate the joy of knowing a God who has first served us, and is tirelessly shaping us into channels of healing and love. Like the sacramental signs of water, oil, bread and wine, God is using us to show how God intends to transform this world into the kingdom whose only language is love. God continues to bless the world, through us. This is God's work in partnership with us.

May we experience it not only as our life-long responsibility, but also as our great joy and delight. Amen.