



May 23, 2010  
Pentecost Sunday

*What Does This Mean?\**  
Rev. James Lamkin

**Acts 2:1-21; Genesis 11:1-9; John 20:19-22**

\*The following contains some of the notes James Lamkin used in preaching the morning sermon...

Thesis: the most basic spiritual question is about meaning; and how we grapple with that question is the answer.

### **Introduction**

Anything like the events of these texts ever happen to you? And you would confess to it? What do we do with this story that seems so foreign from our experience?

But what if we allow the gravity of this extraordinary story draw to our ordinary lives into its power and we leave at least asking: in what ways may the unpredictable Holy Spirit be at work in my life?

So here's the picture: The wind of the Spirit blows through like a scene from *Storm Chasers*. The foundations shake. Fire dances, hot and fierce, licking the heads of the disciples. Accusations of public drunkenness are made. All the while, an annoying cacophony of different dialects and languages jabbars in the air.

Sounds like a cross between a scene from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Avatar*. Perhaps the Bible should come with 3-D glasses.

But then, oddly the discordant sounds morph and harmonize like a Barber Shop Quartet's final chord where the musical tension is resolved by sliding into the final note of "God's deeds of power." God was not just in the past. God was present, now.

The onlookers are amazed and perplexed and a question rises out of the crowd's confusion: What does this mean?

As I think about it, I think the church may have begun right there. There when curiosity grows into yearning and yearning becomes initiative and imitative becomes hopeful inquiry. What does this mean?

The church was birthed with a question.

"Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions," said Ranier Maria Rilke.

The church was birthed with a question.

Northside Drive Baptist Church is a community that values questions. For some, faith is best punctuated with the bat and ball of exclamation! For me spirituality is best punctuated with a mark shaped like a grappling hook. For with faith I grapple.

### **What does this mean?**

Their question is a reminder that whatever else spirituality is it asks about attending to meaning.

What does this mean?

Mary the mother of Jesus asked that question. Gabriel shows-up and tells her this incredible news—you are pregnant and you are pregnant with the Messiah. And her response: a question: How can this be, what does this mean?

Last week, the text of the disciples gazing into heaven. The question of meaning blazened on their foreheads.

It is a question humans ask. The firstborn graduates from High School and a dad asks himself, what does this mean? The baby in the family finally moves out of the house and the mother looks in the mirror and asks, what does this mean?

"Well doc," we say, as the doctor looks over our blood work on the chart, "I've always been able to eat anything I want." And the doc says, "Well not any more."

What does this mean, I'm retired, got the plaque on the wall and the company watch on my arm...and time on my hands...what does this mean?

David Allen, the productivity guru says when asked, "What is different about business these days?" His answer is "meaning changes more rapidly."

Text is clear, the onlookers were good folk minding their own business, and suddenly they were accosted by Pentecost. The unexpected happened, and they wondered, "What does this mean?"

It is a spiritual question and folk show-up in my study asking it all of the time. Folk may look mad or sad or hurt or happy—but really they are asking a question of meaning? Where do I put this in my story? Meaning is a spiritual question.

For me, the text has two gifts in its hands: one is chaos has been a part of the church's story from the beginning so why should I be surprised by that; and the second is sometimes we find God more in our growing edges than in our core values.

**First, when I complain about how chaotic life is, I think of this text and see that it was this way from the beginning.** Perhaps the only thing more messy than birth is life. and sometimes it is hard to know labor pains from death throes.

Perplexed and amazed they said what does this mean? Is something dying out; or is something being born? The answer is Yes.

Oh, for the day when Sir Isaac Newton's world view dominated our world view. Everything was in its place. The planets were in their orbits. Gravity and galaxies stayed put just like God made them.

And then Quantum mechanics showed up and scattered our puzzle pieces. Quantum shade tree mechanics began telling us that the universe, especially the sub-atomic universe is must stranger, much more mysterious than we knew. Where energy can become matter and change back again. Where gravity is in question and where you can't measure anything because nothing holds still.

I was told by a physicist in Fez, Morocco, this is the metaphor for the new millennium. Maybe for the spiritual life to. What God is up to with us and around us is indescribable. Our language works as well as trying to paint the Sistine chapel with an 8 pack box of stubby Crayola crayons.

For me, this view of God and world on my best days evokes humility. Especially since I am in the word business. The Episcopal Priest, Robert Farrar Capon, says that our capacity of speaking of God's ultimate being and doing *is like an oyster trying to describe a ballerina*.

Maybe the accent on what seems like chaos is one more challenge to us to trust God. How hard is that?

**And the second, what if God is sometimes found more at my growing edges than in my core values?**

This aha came to me years ago when I heard Fred Craddock say something. Pentecost means that the gospel did not start in one place and then travel to the ends of the earth, it means that it started with the ends of the earth which all happened to be in one place.

As much as we RA's and GA's memorized the story arc of gospel expansion: in Judea and in Samaria and to the uttermost ends of the earth, on the day of Pentecost the story goes that the ends of the earth were in on it from the beginning.

Barbara Taylor, in her book *Altar in the World* describes her participation in a Shabbat meal. She mentions some of the rituals, some of the words, some of the traditions and then the line: "At that moment, it was simply a way of heading toward the edge of my own tradition in order to meet people who were reaching out to me from the edge of their own."

Isn't that something? That God may be waiting for us at the edges, at the growing edges of our lives, of our church, ready to grow us some more.

How that shakes out with doing missions, and for me, inter-faith dialogue, is that the stranger knows something I don't know.

When traveling back from Istanbul one month ago, a young woman sat by me on the plane. She was on a walk-about around the world. She had been in Kenya for several months; but the time had come to leave. We compared notes of our treks.

I told her of being in Turkey with an inter-faith group of Muslims, Jews and Christians. She was intrigued. And she asked me, "Were you there to do mission work?" Yes, I said, in a way. But the mission work is inside us. And as we do that mission work, we go back to Atlanta. that is the mission field.