

## Seen and unseen

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Pentecost Sunday - May 23, 2021

Texts: Acts 2:1-21; Romans 8:22-27, John 16:26-27

SCRIPTURE READING Acts 2:1-4, 16-18, 21

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.

As it was spoken through the prophet Joel: "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... Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

SCRIPTURE READING Romans 8:22-27 We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

GOSPEL READING John 16:12-13

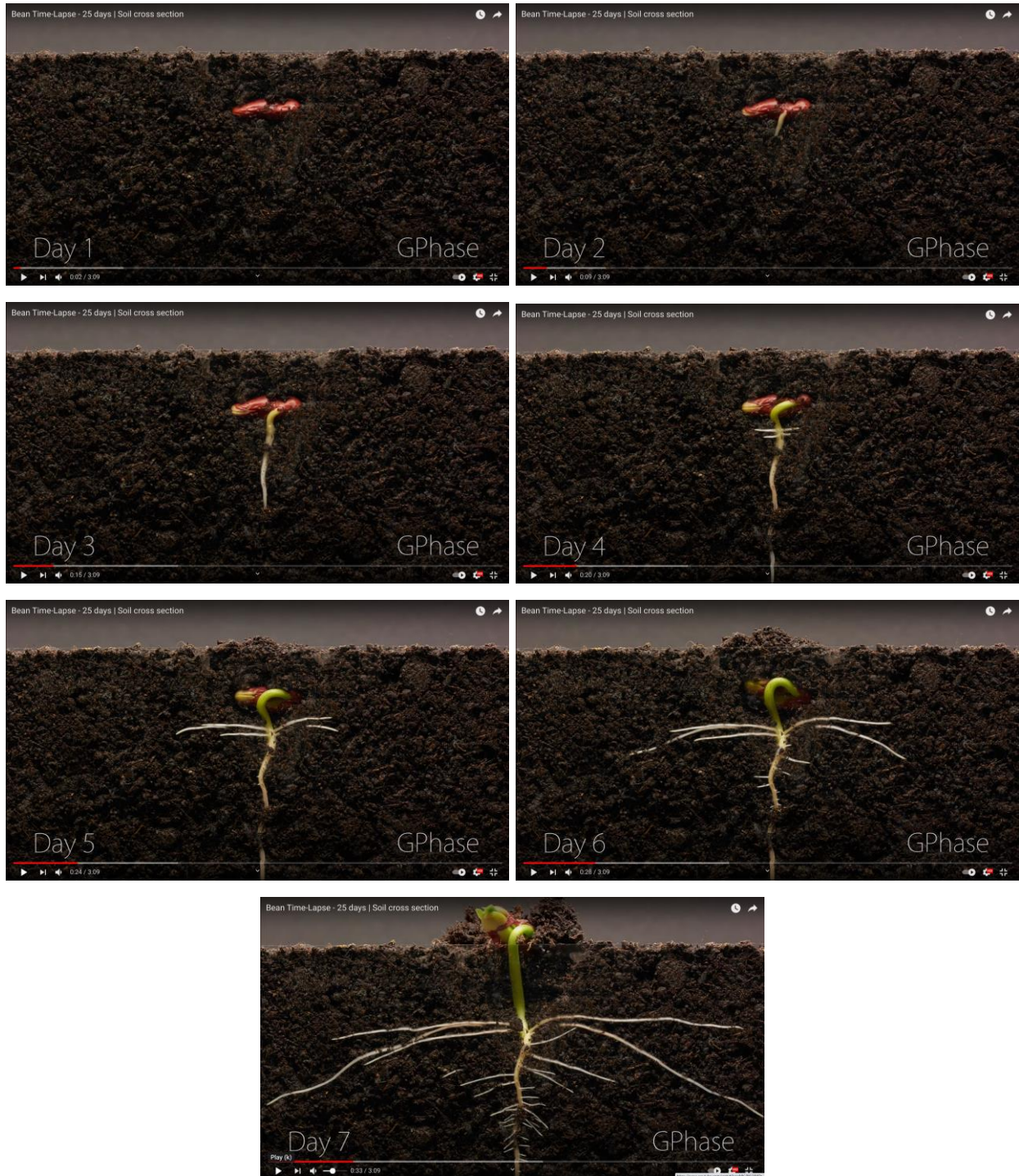
*From Jesus' final address to the disciples: since "spirit" is feminine in both Greek and Hebrew, the feminine pronoun can be used.*

"When the Spirit of truth comes, she will guide you into all the truth; for she will not speak on her own, but will speak whatever she hears, and she will declare to you the things that are to come."

How long does it take for a seed to germinate? That depends.

Last spring, when the pandemic was in early days, I planted heirloom peas - heirloom as in, not hybrid, heirloom as in not genetically modified to die after one season. No, these heirloom peas were the many times offspring of peas grown, eaten, and saved year after year by someone's pioneer ancestors. We let a few dry on the vine, shelled them, stored them. Last week I planted those peas, pale, hard little pebbles. And waited. And hoped. How long does it take for a seed to germinate? That depends.

Say it's a bean seed. Do you remember the first time you planted a bean seed in the ground, or maybe just in a styrofoam cup of soil? Do you remember itching to see it break ground? Maybe you couldn't wait and dug it up with a finger to see what was happening, which in that case would have been, not much anymore. If you left it alone, amazing things went on, out of sight. Unseen. Seven days for the average bean seed to break cover, break ground.



How long does it take for a good idea to germinate? That depends. Is it watered, is it fed? Is it left in peace when its roots are still young and tender, unseen? The Spirit burrows into places we can't see. Haven't you ever taken a problem to bed, completely stumped, and awakened next day with the solution clear and simple in your mind? Or looked everywhere for a mislaid key and then, when you finally gave up searching, a vision of where you left it suddenly pops into your head? The Spirit works like that. Thank God for revealing what we don't know we know!

How long did it take for the church to germinate? Jesus, after rising from death, stayed with the disciples for forty days, teaching them, touching them, blessing them. Telling them to lie low until the Helper showed up. Then he vanished from their sight. They vanished, too, into an upper room. They went to ground, 120 of them, together. They prayed, worshipped. Waited. Hoped. Unseen by the world. But amazing things were happening, out of sight.

Until the day of Pentecost. By the way, Christians didn't invent Pentecost. Pentecost was an ancient Jewish festival, exactly 50 days after Passover. Pentecost was loaded with meaning for religious Jews. They came back to Jerusalem from every corner of the ancient world like we go home for Christmas. There, they celebrated the first fruits harvest of spring planting, and praised God for the gift of the Law, God's outline for life in community. The Law that was their hope through years of exile, absence. The Law that Jesus came not to negate but to fulfill (Matt. 5:17).

When the Holy Spirit, the Helper, the Advocate, the Friend, the Comforter, did arrive, praying in secret was not an option. When she (I say "she" because the word for Spirit is feminine in both Greek and Hebrew) - when she came with a noise like wind and the look of fire, those 120 believers broke cover and burst on the Jerusalem scene like popping corn with the lid off.

How long did it take the church to germinate? That depends. Ten days in an upper room? Or thirteen centuries of Jewish faithfulness (and some wrong turns, too)? Or the two thousand years since 120 people came pouring out of an upper room, on fire with a truth too big and too joyful to hold inside?

Isn't it amazing that as we mark the day the disciples burst out of their shell and took to the streets, we too are coming out of the places where we went to ground over a year ago? We've been waiting, hoping, praying in our own pod or bubble. We come together because we know that, like the song says, there *IS* a sweet, sweet Spirit in this place - and gathered virtually.

What is the church, really, but a seedbed, a nursery, a greenhouse where believers are planted and grow roots and get strong, until they're ready to thrive in some new soil somewhere? Church is the place where issues can be raised, opinions aired, ideas tested and tried and offered to the world.





Church is where we love each other even if we're different. A place where the young see visions and the old dream dreams. A place to ask questions, and grow into answers together.



Pentecost tells us about waiting in hope: As Paul wrote to people in Rome he had never met but hoped to visit, “Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?” “The opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is certainty” (Anne LaMott). Praise God for the disbelief that cracked the hard shell of my know-it-all nature! Because “in the place where we are always right, flowers will never grow. Loves

and doubts dig up the soil” for new seed, new visions, new dreams (Yehuda Amichai). Praise God for broken ground and broken lives where Spirit flies in and takes root.

Pentecost tells us, too, that every time the Spirit shows up, she expresses herself in diversity, in difference: a babble of languages, a rainbow of cultures, yes, even a worldful of different faiths, but one truth: That love is the only power stronger than death.



This *we* preach in the name of Christ, living, dying, rising, spreading faster and wider than wind, on the wings of the Spirit. And Pentecost tells us that no matter how eager the speaker, it's the Spirit alive in the listener that seizes that word and embraces it. Do you think I would ever have the audacity to stand up and throw these words at you if I didn't believe the Spirit was waiting inside you to catch them, fix them, plant them in your heart?

Yes, individuals can still pick up the wrong signal, even in church. Dyllan Roof, who killed nine people at a prayer meeting of Emmanuel AME in Charleston, South Carolina, belonged to a Lutheran church. He believed his sad and twisted ideas were God-given. They weren't. The death and hate in them proved that. But the church, too, has contributed at times to faulty doctrines, privileging some over others. And so we test the spirits: is this thought life-giving? Does this word cultivate understanding, or breed bitterness? Does this idea challenge my personal prejudice? If so, how shall I hear it, with humility? Even preachers need to be tested.



Oh, people, this space that Glenna and I have shared these many Sunday mornings hasn't really been as empty as it seemed. The Spirit has been working in ways we couldn't see. So much has been revealed in this past year - we've learned what we didn't know we knew. And what we see this morning is only partly seen; hope is still larger than life. Pretty soon we will be truly hybrid in worship - not hybrid as in plants altered

to die after one generation, but as in worshipping together and apart in ways that would have knocked the disciples off their feet in amazement.

I believe that the church was born on that Pentecost morning, and I believe that the church is being born again here and now, and in a million other places around the world. The Big Idea, the Big Love, is constantly germinating, in generation after generation, in new ways, new languages, new media, telling the old, old story of Jesus and his love, because Jesus' Spirit cannot be quenched. We plant the seeds and we wait. We pray. We hope. We trust rain and sun and soil to do their unseen work; we trust God's Word and God's Spirit will do their work, too, seen and unseen. We trust God's faithfulness.



And this morning, early, there were new pea plants peeking out of the soil in my garden.

Thanks be to God!