

*Filled with New Wine*  
Acts 2:1-21

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I have been thoroughly enjoying watching the new *Cosmos* series, with Neil DeGrasse Tyson.

There's something deeply humbling, you know, when the series you remember as a child from the first run is remade and everyone refers to the original as though it's ancient history.

So I got a little wistful for the original series with Carl Sagan and I started looking back at the history of it. Like the new one, Sagan explored the mysteries of the universe through science over thirteen episodes.

In the thirteenth, concluding episode, Sagan asks the question, "Who speaks for Earth?" when meeting extraterrestrials. In his answer, he gives an overview of the progression of human history and concludes with admonition to humankind to cherish life and continue on its journey through the Cosmos.

It was a lovely image and it was picked up recently with an episode of the new series.

As Tyson is explaining the mechanisms and working of radio telescopes, he makes note that from the moment of the very first broadcast transmission of a radio on earth, we have been sending a message out into space – that the message that has been sent is traveling light years ahead of what we can possibly see and know and is perhaps even being heard as we viewed the program.

As he was speaking, being an old college history major, I started cataloguing in my mind the progression of broadcast media.

At first, I was fine with it – I thought about Roosevelt’s fireside chats, and the soaring rhetoric of Winston Churchill to the British people.

But then I remembered that if Roosevelt and Churchill’s speeches were headed out into the universe on behalf of humankind, so then were the speeches of Hitler and Mussolini.

As I panned forward through human history, I remembered the speeches of Dr. King and Kennedy’s inaugural address – and I was fine – for a moment. Then I remembered the cold war and segregation and Apartheid and I wasn’t optimistic for the impression that might be drawn of our civilization by any outside observer.

I had a brief lift when I thought of the fall of the Berlin wall, but then I remembered the Balkans and Rwanda and Sudan – it really is a roller-coaster ride to think of the progression of human history when one thinks of how it looks. There are ups and downs, good moments and bad – “who speaks for Earth?” to repeat Dr. Sagan’s question.

And then I got to the present and realized that it’s the Kardashians.

It really is a cacophony of voices isn’t it?

And of course, there is good cacophony and bad – there is the cacophony of a beautiful melody being sung – as we heard this morning – where the layering of voice upon voice reinforces and builds that message of grace and good news, and love divine coming down.

And of course, there is bad cacophony too – but I’d rather not repeat those messages.

But then, just as Sagan asked, “who speaks for earth?” so we have to ask, “who speaks for church?”

It all puts me in mind of that Pentecost story.

What a cacophony of voices was heard.

In fact, it wasn't just a cacophony of voices, it was a cacophony of languages.

We know that each heard in their own language, in the language of the Medes and the Parthians, Elamites, the residents of Mesopotamia and Judea and Cappadocia.

And in a move worthy of Carl Sagan, the story teller bends not only geography to bring all of these nationalities into one place to hear the Pentecost sermon, he also bends time to bring them together – there hadn't been some of those nationalities in a couple of hundred years.

And anytime you start bending language, geography, and time to tell a story, you know something big is up.

And surely something is. Peter gives his testimony to the crowd assembled, and what tumbles out of his mouth is a word of hope and redemption.

“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,” he says.

He wends his way through his sermon and ends with the good news that those who call upon the Lord shall be saved

But not before he makes a rather punchy remark.

To those who sneered that the Christians were drunk on new wine, he returned the answer, “It's not yet nine o'clock in the morning.”

Clearly he was not familiar with the concept of the bottomless mimosa.

But more importantly, what does that say about the nature of the testimony?

It was not bashful, to say the least.

Soooo, let me ask you, how's your testimony?

Have you been filled with new wine recently?

To the question, “who speaks for the church,” the answer is unequivocally, “you do.”

To be sure, the public pulpit proclamation of this church is a piece of its speech, and I take that very seriously.

I am reminded of a colleague who was recounting the stories of his ordination and remembered what one professor said to him before, “Ah, ordination. Isn’t that the procedure by which the church lays hands on its ministers and prays on them and then yanks out their spines at the end?”

I take seriously that you come to hear serious challenge from this pulpit and I don’t worry too much about offending you – I trust that in the pastor-parishioner relationship you respect me enough to talk to me if something I preach disquiets or challenges or even offends you. I trust that this is a free pulpit and I am grateful to God for that because there are certainly plenty enough preachers who have paid big prices for speaking what they believed to be the truth.

A Methodist minister was defrocked for officiating his son’s wedding recently and yet I was perfectly free, as your pastor, to join the board of the Covenant Network to work actively for full inclusion of LGBT folks in every aspect of the church’s life together and not for one moment was I worried about the decision.

So the pulpit proclamation of the church is certainly important, but it’s not the whole witness of the church.

Have you been filled with new wine recently?

There’s certainly a cacophony of voices out there – which sound is rising to the top?

Pentecost is the filling of God's people with the spirit of God – to speak God's word.

Hear again what Peter preached:

'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.'

Note what the text does not say, "My spirit shall fall upon your pastors and staff and your program directors and choirmasters shall prophesy..."

No, listen to the nouns: all flesh, sons and daughters, young and old.

The message of gospel is entrusted to us all – and the Spirit of God falls upon us all.

So let me ask you again, have you been filled with new wine recently?

The cacophony needs your song.

One of my favorite session meetings every year, yes I do have favorites, is our December meeting.

In that meeting, our elders-elect and deacons-elect make their profession of faith. It's an autobiographical testimony of the ways that they came to be called to leadership of the church.

The Book of Order of the church dictates that all officers shall be examined, and rather than subject our elders and deacons to memorizing the minutia of a book that at times reads like stereo-instructions and being quizzed, I thought it much better that they should learn the index of the book and simply tell us about themselves and their stories of faith.

I'd invite you all to come and listen each December, but I'm afraid I'd never be able to get another deacon or elder to agree to serve if I did!

It's wonderful because we learn things about each other. We learn about journeys with cancer. We've heard about overcoming mental illness and addiction, we've learned about people who sang, "This little light of Mine, I'm gonna let it shine," but were told to put it under a bushel basket because of their sexual orientation. And we learn good things too, about the churches that nurtured and shaped these leaders and the scriptures that guide them. And yes, I pack a handkerchief for that meeting.

It's probably the most wonderful, human moment that our elders and deacons share every year.

It is also testimony. It is as powerful a witness to the Gospel as exists. It is our voices being raised in cacophony to tell the story of Jesus Christ and the grace of God.

And I also know perfectly well that it is nerve-wracking for at least a few of our folks each year to put themselves out there so much.

But that is how the church has a voice.

And we cannot let the order of the church get in the way of the ardor.

Have you been filled with new wine recently?

I have to tell you that when you open the door to the possibility of witness, you may never know what God is going to do with what you say and do.

You know that wonderful quote from Maya Angelou that has been circulating in the days since her death, "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

That is so very true. Think of it: you're here because of what someone did.

When you speak the words of testimony that give the church a voice in the cacophony, you lose control over what happens next. That's when God takes over.

Peter wasn't a paragon of Christian virtue before the Spirit got a hold of him. But God did something.

You can never dismiss what God can do with our efforts, however meager they seem.

And I know that sometimes it seems like there is too much going on in our lives to make the time and take on the effort of witness, in word and in deed, as we are charged in the great commission.

My friend Dedie Kelso shared a story with me told by Marj Carpenter, who for many years worked for the Presbyterian Church in communications. She said,

“In 1989, the members of the Presbyterian church of Cameroon invited me to come to their 125th anniversary, and I went. It was a difficult trip because I was talking up in Hudson River Presbytery in a snowstorm. When I left Kennedy Airport it was 18 degrees, and when I got to Cameroon, it was 118. That's a hundred degree difference and it can wilt you fast.

But we had a wonderful week. They were really celebrating there. They had parades and were on television. They had concerts. They had worship services and banquets. It was just a marvelous week. Then on Sunday there were so many people that they had to hold the celebration outside. They put the [communion table] outside of the church and 40,000 Cameroon Presbyterians sat up on the hillside. Eight choirs sang and they rattled things and played drums and danced around. It was a great event.

Finally it got quiet and there was just a single drum with a single beat in the background. I looked up to see what was happening, and I saw a long line of Cameroon Presbyterian preachers processing in one by one, and they were singing in French. I don't

speaking French, but I knew they were singing, 'The Church's One Foundation Is Jesus Christ Our Lord.' I knew we had done something right in Cameroon.

As I flew back home, I thought about what I'd experienced. I was so happy about it and was feeling good. Then I took a pencil and subtracted and I got 1864. I thought, No way could we have started a mission field in 1864. I found what I was looking for under 'Foreign Missions Report.' It said, 'The world is watching us in our travail to see if we're serious about the global mission and the Great Commission.' It named the first three missionaries that were opening a mission field in the Cameroons....

I sat there quietly for a long time and finally pulled down the minutes of the 'Presbyterian Church of the Confederacy,' which is what the Southern Church called themselves at that time. Under 'Foreign Missions Report' it said, 'Our backs are to the wall and our homes are being burned and our churches destroyed, but we must send another missionary to Brazil.' It named the missionary."<sup>1</sup>

There is a cacophony of voices to be heard, and the cacophony can be pulled one way or the other, toward negativity and consumerism and focus on self, or the cacophony can tell the story of grace, and hope, and truth.

It's all in the voices that are being heard. So let me ask you once more: have you been filled with new wine recently?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>This story was shared by Dr. Adelia Kelso in a sermon at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, NC.