JAZZ IT UP!

Acts 2:1-21

May 28, 2023

Guilford Park Presbyterian Church

Once upon a time, a guide was leading a man on a safari through a jungle. And the man began to hear some jazz drumming – furious, pounding drumming, rolling along without end. It was as if Gene Krupa had taken up residence in the jungle. Well, after about fifteen minutes of this, the man asked the guide: “When do the drums stop?” And the guide answered: “Oh, drums never stop. Bad thing happens when drums stop.”

The man pondered this for about two hours, as the furious pounding of the drums continued. So, he asked once again, quite irritated: “Come on, when do the drums stop?” And the guide repeated: “Drums never stop. Bad thing happens when drums stop.”

Finally, after five hours of this drumming, the man shouted: “OK, OK, what bad thing happens when the drums stop?”

And the guide replied: “Accordion takes solo!”

Well, I mean no offense to you accordion players out there, but the accordion does have a certain reputation – not always complimentary – among jazz players. It’s like that Far Side cartoon that depicts jazz great Charlie Parker on an elevator with an accordion player (also a banjo player, but that’s another story) with the caption: “Charlie Parker in Hell.”

However – all kidding aside – musicians since the 1930’s – although not well known – have played and recorded jazz on the accordion. To quote Barry Kernfeld, editor of the New Grove Dictionary of Jazz: “The accordion has a long, undistinguished history in jazz.” Even the great jazz pianist, George Shearing, recorded some jazz solos on the accordion. In truth, the accordion is an amazing, versatile instrument that lends itself to a wide array of jazz solo possibilities – it does, that is, if the player puts caution to the wind when playing music and decides to just “jazz it up.”

Anyway, it’s not a bad thing for the drummer to stop so that the accordion can take a solo. For jazz is a universal language – such that anyone, anywhere can “take a solo,” as it were, and anyone else, anywhere else, will hear it and understand it – provided he or she is open to doing so.

All this reminds me of one of the churches I served during my ministry career. Before moving back to Greensboro in 2003, I served First Presbyterian Church in Connersville, Indiana. And when I was there, I decided to start a jazz worship service. It was a new thing for the church, although there were a number of members who were avid jazz fans. In fact, there were a few members who had played some jazz in their day, so I thought it would be fun to form a jazz band, consisting entirely of members of the church.

My idea was to lead a fairly typical Presbyterian worship service, except that the music in the service would primarily be jazz, played by a home-grown band – a band I called “The Presby Stompers.” I figured that the music we played would communicate with a wide variety of people. I also hoped that the people listening and participating in the jazz service would be able to experience the presence of the Spirit of God in the music we played and in the reaction of the diverse people sitting around them. I hoped that they would understand this universal language – called “jazz” – no matter what their normal or preferred “language,” so to speak, might have been.

And, I must say, that is what happened. I only remember one person who stayed away from these jazz services because he thought it was “sacrilegious” or something. I led the services every time there was a fifth Sunday in a month, and these Fifth Sunday Jazz Services proved to be wildly popular in the town of Connersville. All kinds of people came – including people who never went to church; including people from most of the other churches in town; including practically all of our members; including people from surrounding towns; even including Presbytery staff from Indianapolis! Eventually, we “Presby Stompers” began offering these jazz services to other churches around the state, and we frequently played in other venues as well. Our hope was that wherever we played, people would feel the real presence of the Spirit in the jazz – as we “jazzed up” that same Spirit in our music.

I do believe that these jazz worship services were some of the most spirit -filled services of which I have ever been a part. From the opening “Just a Closer Walk with Thee,” through a repertoire that grew to over 100 tunes of all styles of jazz, to the closing “When the Saints Go Marching In,” the place was rocking – and the place was worshipping!

And in the pews were people from just about every “place” you could imagine – in terms of worldview, theological stance, belief system, or whatever – all gathered together in that worship place called First Presbyterian Church. They all had their own “language,” but I believe they all heard and understood this universal language, called jazz, that the Presby Stompers played. They heard it in their own way, in their own space, in their own hearts and minds. And I’m pretty sure that they experienced the power of the life-giving Spirit of God, whether they knew it as such or not. I believe they awakened to the energy of God that is the Spirit of God that dwells in us and exists all around us – and comes to life when we “jazz it up.”

Well, I hope you can see where I’m going with this description of the Fifth Sunday Jazz Services led by the Presby Stompers. For I see that experience in Connersville, Indiana as analogous to the experience that Luke, the author of the book of Acts, describes in the second chapter of Acts on the Day of Pentecost. I see this experience that Luke describes on the Day of Pentecost as one big “jazz worship service,” in which the disciples take their own language and “jazz it up,” so to speak – such that the language and sound of God’s Spirit shines through. And “devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem,” as the text says – each with their own language – are able to hear and experience and understand the disciples’ “jazzed up” language – which is the universal language of God’s Spirit.

We read that part of that language is a sound “like the rush of a violent wind,” as the text says. “Wind,” of course, is one of the English translations for the Greek word for “spirit,” which is “pneuma.” This is the same spirit which is the “wind from God” that “swept over the face of the waters” in the first story of creation at the beginning of the Bible – using the Hebrew word for wind – “ruah.” And yet another translation for both “ruah” and “pneuma” is “breath,” like the breath that “breathes the breath of life” into humankind in the second story of creation at the beginning of the Bible – or the breath that Jesus breathes into the disciples in the gospel of John, telling them to “receive the Holy Spirit” – which is John’s version of Pentecost.

There are also poetic “tongues of fire” in our Pentecost story. Fire is a primary symbol throughout the Bible for the real presence of God. It’s also the symbol for the Holy Spirit on our official Presbyterian symbol. There is a lot of “fire” in this Day of Pentecost jazz service!

And then there is the language itself! The disciples gathered together on that Day of Pentecost are “filled with the Holy Spirit” and they begin to “speak in other languages,” as the text says. Not only that, but all those people around them – from “every nation under heaven” – seem to be able to understand what they are saying. It’s kind of like the United Nations, where people from every nation can listen to a speech by a person from a different nation, and can understand what that person is saying, because the headphones they wear instantly translates the particular speech into their own native language. The Spirit of God is like those “headphones.” The Spirit of God takes each native language and “jazzes it up,” changing it into a universal language.

Incidentally, this Pentecost story in Acts is not a “reversal” of the Tower of Babel story in the Old Testament – as you may have heard taught. The Babel story is a story about providing a rationale for why there are so many different languages in the world. The Pentecost story does not reverse that situation. There are still many different languages in the world. It’s just that now people who speak those different languages are able to understand a universal language – the language of the Spirit of God – when they awaken to the real presence of that Spirit with and within them all – when they put caution to the wind and just “jazz it up!”

Well, all this is what I am encouraging today for all of you diverse folks gathered here in this place. I am encouraging a “jazz worship service,” if you will – in your minds and hearts and souls. I am encouraging you to listen to the sound of the wind, feel the tongues of fire, speak the universal language of the Spirit – such that others might know this same Spirit. For this gift of the Spirit to these first century people on the Day of Pentecost is your gift as well – encouraging you to help spread the Good News of God’s love throughout the world – to be the energy of God’s Spirit – to be disciples, witnesses to the love of Christ in this community and in this world.

So – my fellow musicians: Awaken to the universal Spirit of God – and manifest the energy of that Spirit in your lives for the sake of others. Dare to “take a solo” – and as you do, remember to “jazz it up!”

Let us pray: God of Pentecost: When you send forth your Spirit, we are created; and you renew the face of the ground. Help us to sing your language of love – as long as we have being – and forevermore. Amen.