

# AColyte

Pentecost 2020

A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things  
at Austin College



“What am I hearing?”

## TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

North Texas  
Tornado Season  
Feeling a Disturbance in the Force  
May 29, 2020

*There's a might judgment coming;  
But I may be wrong.  
You hear these funny voices  
In the Tower of Song.  
--Leonard Cohen,  
"Tower of Song"*

*Do you know why the trees bend  
At the west Texas border?  
Do you know why they bend  
Sway and twine?  
The trees bend because of the wind  
Across that lonesome border  
The trees bend because of the wind  
Almost all the time  
--Joe Ely,  
"Because of the Wind"*

*Right here. Right now.  
There is no other place I want to be.  
--Jesus Jones,  
"Right Here, Right Now"*

My Dad is a piece of work.

He retired after working for TXU and its predecessor companies for 35 or so years. He worked in various departments over the course of his career, much of it in Human Resources.

But—before any of that—my Dad was, and to some extent will always be, an electrical engineer. He was in the first 4-year graduating class at the university that is now UTA (it was Arlington State College when he graduated from there in 1961).

And before he ever got into Personnel and Administrative work, my Dad was a pencil-sharpening, slide-rule wielding engineer.



True—he was kind of an extroverted engineer.

[Do you know how you can tell if you're talking to an extroverted engineer?  
The extroverted engineer is the one who looks at *your* shoes when they're talking to you  
instead of looking at their *own* shoes.—ED.]

My Dad might look at your shoes while he talks to you, but—from the beginning of his career—he has always been a careful, detail-oriented engineer.

From time to time for as long as I can remember—when I would be with my Dad

- on a long car trip,
- or as he sat in his La-Z-Boy recliner

he would suddenly stop down whatever conversation was going on, pause, scrunch his face into a frown, and say

“What am I hearing?”

Think about that.

Put yourself in that place for a second.

My Mom and brother and I—and later on my wife and kids—had *no idea* what Dad might be hearing.

It's kind of a strange question.

And he asked it a lot (still does occasionally).

When I was a teenager it took all the self-control I could muster not to respond to his “What Am I Hearing?” question by saying something like,

“I don't know, old man.

Who knows what might be bouncing around in your old engineer's brain?”

But as I've gotten older, become more patient, and developed a little sympathy, I've finally figured out that all those times I've heard my engineer Dad say “what am I hearing?”—he was actually communicating something like:

“I'm hearing a noise that is uncomfortable, unclear, or unexpected in this context. Can you help me figure out what it is—  
so my engineer brain can once again rest comfortably in the knowledge that I have a basic understanding of what's going on around me?”

*That's* what he *meant*.

But what he always said was, "What Am I Hearing?"

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For multiple reasons that are obvious to most of my friends – and especially obvious to my Dad – I am not an engineer.

I'm a Chaplain.

I don't often use pencils or slide rules.

My tools are ears and texts and words.

Over the course of many years working at Austin College, especially around this time of year, I have often found myself in what my students call "TROYL" conversations.

"TROYL" stands for

**THE  
REST  
OF  
YOUR  
LIFE.**

Several times every year, I end up in talking to a given student about THE REST OF YOUR LIFE.

Those conversations are hardly ever scheduled.

They usually just kind of sneak up.

But questions about who they are, who they want to be, and maybe even and who they are meant to be, are never very far from the minds of Austin College students.

You read something,  
or you hear something in a class discussion,  
or you encounter some new person,  
or have some profound experience on our campus  
or a long way from our campus,  
or somebody just says something to you

and all of a sudden you're asking serious questions about who you are and who you want to be.

It's all good.

You are right on schedule.

But it's an uncomfortable place to be.

It's hard when you know you want to do *something*, but you're not sure exactly what.

And it's maybe even more uncomfortable when you *thought* you knew, but now you're not so sure.

Sometimes you encounter some unclear and unexpected things, and they mess with your sense of who you are.

And so students come to me to have those TROYL conversations.

Or they go to a trusted professor, or to one of our career counselors, or a coach.

And basically what those students say is, "What Am I Hearing?"

"How do I make sense of these experiences and ideas and passions and turn them into a plan for what to do next--ideally, a plan that will get my parents off my back and let me sleep at night?"

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It's a difficult place to be.

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This Sunday is Pentecost Sunday.

All over the world, Christians will read Acts 2:1-21 on Sunday morning.

It's another in the long series of weird Bible stories we've been looking at all Spring.

And I think it's a story that might have something to do with my Dad's "What Am I Hearing?" question, TROYL conversations with AC students, and what's going on in all of our lives right now.

It's a familiar story to many Christians about the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost is often the occasion for a "Birthday Party for the Church" in Children's sermons.

That's a cute way to tell the story.

But I think we in the Church may have filed off the points of the Pentecost story and sanded its edges through the centuries.

[That's an homage to Eric Church's song "Mr. Misunderstood":  
"They tried to file my points and sand my edges"—ED.  
<https://youtu.be/r0uF3k-asA>]

The Pentecost story is not really a peaceful, reassuring, calming story.

Let me show you:

*1 When the day of Pentecost had come,  
they were all together in one place.*

Pentecost was a Jewish festival that took place fifty days after Passover, and traditionally marked the day that the Jews were given the Torah on Mt. Sinai.

Now check out what Luke says happened:

*2 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.*

When Luke tells the Pentecost story, the first thing he talks about—in verse 2 of Acts 2 is "a sound like the rush of a violent wind."

The Pentecost story begins with an uncomfortable, unclear, and unexpected noise.

This is Texas in May.

We know what a violent wind sounds like.

That's not a peaceful or gentle or reassuring image at all.

It's a scary image.

And it get worse.

**3** *Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them,  
and a tongue rested on each of them.*

So, according to Luke, when the Spirit shows up, it's like having your hair on fire during a tornado.

Not exactly a comfortable image.

But that's what the Bible says.

One of the lessons of the Pentecost story that—at least some of the time—God's Spirit makes people **uncomfortable**.

**4** *All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit  
and began to speak in other languages,  
as the Spirit gave them ability.*

**5** *Now there were devout Jews  
from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem.*

**6** *And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered,  
because each one heard them speaking  
in the native language of each.*

All of a sudden, lots and lots of people understand what's going on.

**7** *Amazed and astonished, they asked,  
"Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?"*

**8** *And how is it that we hear, each of us,  
in our own native language?...*

“Bewildered”

“Amazed”

Astonished”

?

Like my engineer Dad;

like students asking questions about THE REST OF THEIR LIVES;

when the crowd at Pentecost encounters uncomfortable, unclear, and unexpected noises, their first response is, essentially, “What am I hearing?”

**11 ...—**

*in our own languages*

*we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power."*

This hugely diverse crowd with all sorts of different backgrounds and different native languages are all able to understand what's going on and have this common experience of God's presence.

That makes me think about all the different people, and different kinds of people, who have stepped up and done what they could to help us all respond to COVID-19—in the USA and all over the world.

Lots and lots of people have done lots and lots of amazing, selfless, noble, beautiful things.

It's a little like all those people at Pentecost understanding a common and relevant message in their particular and diverse contexts.

**12** *All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another,  
"What does this mean?"*

“Amazed”

“Perplexed”

“What does this mean?”

More questions.

**13** *But others sneered and said,  
"They are filled with new wine."*



Amazing things were happening at Pentecost.

But some in the crowd just couldn't process that.

They didn't have the categories, the vocabulary, the imagination to understand what's going on.

So they opted for the cheap interpretation that didn't require them to learn anything new:

*"They're all just drunk."*

Something happened that they didn't expect, so they dismissed it.

In the last few years--before he plays his signature song, *Up Against the Wall, Redneck Mother* – Texas singer/songwriter Ray Wylie Hubbard often says,

*"the trouble with irony is that not everybody gets it."*

Verse 13 makes me think about fellow citizens here in Sherman dadgum Texas right now who fairly belligerently and intentionally ignore social distancing and make a show out of not wearing masks as though that were a sign of strength and toughness.

That's kind of like what's going on in verse 13.

The Spirit gets busy in this story, but not everybody gets it.

That's another important lesson for us in the Pentecost story:

Sometimes the Spirit acts in ways that are **unclear**.

***14 But Peter, standing with the eleven,  
raised his voice and addressed them,***

In the middle of that uncomfortable situation, Peter "**raised his voice and addressed them.**"

*"Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem,  
let this be known to you,  
and listen to what I say.*

“Let this be known to you.”  
Listen to what I say.”

Peter is witnessing the same uncomfortable, unexpected, unclear things as the rest of the crowd.

But he’s able to locate what’s happening in a larger context.

**15** *Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose,  
for it is only nine o'clock in the morning.*

“Open your dadgum eyes!”

“Pay attention – don’t blow it off.”

“Focus.”

**16** *No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:*

And then Peter quotes Joel 2:23-32.

He’s locating and interpreting uncomfortable, unclear, and unexpected events in the context of a larger common narrative that is familiar to all who are present.

**17** *"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.*

**18** *Even upon my slaves, both men and women,  
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;  
and they shall prophesy.*

**19** *And I will show portents in the heaven above  
and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist.*

**20** *The sun shall be turned to darkness  
and the moon to blood,  
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.*

**21** *Then everyone who calls  
on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”*

Peter might not have expected the events of Pentecost, but he was ready.

By virtue of his knowledge of scripture and participation in the community of faith, he recognized the God who was acting in uncomfortable, unclear, and unexpected ways on that day in Jerusalem.

He looked around, recognized what was going on, and spoke up.

He located that event in the larger story of God's covenant relationship with God's people.

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If we think about what's going on around and among us using my father's question, "What am I hearing?" along with language, categories, and images from the Pentecost story, I think some things might come into focus.

This unusual story might have something useful to say to all of us right here and right now —

- as we consider the "violent wind" that's blowing through all our lives with this coronavirus moment;
- and as we encounter another (*another!!!*) instance in which an unarmed black man was killed by police officers.

As Luke tells the story, the Spirit acts in ways that are uncomfortable, unfamiliar, and unexpected.

We all know about profound discomfort.

Some of us are probably uncomfortable about the social and political circumstances in which we are living our lives.

Some of us worry about our government's inability or unwillingness to — you know — *govern*.

Lots of us worry about our own health and the health of our loved ones.

We worry about the health of our neighbors and the health of people we will never even know.

We worry about our fellow citizens who face profound and often unnecessary obstacles.

We worry that there might not be enough money – in all sorts of different contexts.

We worry.

The Pentecost story can remind us to look for Holy Spirit in the midst of disturbance and discomfort.

What are we hearing that makes us so uncomfortable?

What's burning?

What might God be up to?

It's not a bad idea every now and then to focus your attention on the things that give you the willies.

As we face uncomfortable, unclear, and unexpected times, we need to speak up.

We need to tell the story that *we* know –  
the story of science, and compassion, and service;  
the story of diversity, unity, and intellectual rigor.

Maybe what we're hearing in these uncertain times is the fulfillment of a promise that *we* will be able:

To see visions, dream dreams, and prophesy;  
To endure and embrace discomfort,  
To look beyond the familiar,  
To be open to surprises;  
And to speak up and tell the truth that we know.

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John Gorka is a folk musician.

My favorite song of his includes this chorus:

*Tell me the truth: what are you living for?  
Tell me the truth: why are you near?  
If you can't make a little good noise  
Tell me, whatcha doing here?*

[<https://youtu.be/ifxBvyFDMNo>]

When Joel promises that the Spirit will enable our sons and daughters to prophesy;

And when the coming of the Spirit leads Peter to stand up and speak the truth that he knows, maybe the lesson is that we *all* need to:

- lean into the discomfort
- and make some good noise.

Raise your voice and tell the truth that you know.

It's time.

Until next time, I remain,  
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,  
Trying to Remember to Speak Truth Tenderly and Lovingly,

JOHN WILLIAMS  
Chaplain