

**“Walking Naked”**  
**Acts 2:1-21, John 7:37-39**  
**Pentecost**  
**May 11, 2008**

*“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.” Acts 2:1*

“Walking naked into the land of uncertainty.”

That is the way Dr. Robert Quinn of the University of Michigan describes the process he calls “deep change.” He writes, “Most of us build our identity around our knowledge and competence in employing certain known techniques or abilities. Making deep change involves abandoning both and ‘walking naked into the land of uncertainty.’”<sup>1</sup> He goes on to say that making deep change usually ends up being a rather terrifying choice. After all, this kind of change involves taking risks, surrendering control, and often attempting to see familiar situations in a brand new ways, something that most humans have always had a hard time doing. Going out into unfamiliar territory is always dangerous. “It is therefore natural,” Quinn writes, “to deny that there is any need for a deep change.”<sup>2</sup>

“Walking naked into the land of uncertainty.”

That rather unusual way of stating a concept with which most of us are familiar just might explain something that has always troubled me. This morning’s story begins by telling us that 50 days after the resurrection, the followers of Jesus, 120 of them in all, were still holed up in that upper room somewhere in the middle of Jerusalem. You would think that after seeing the risen Jesus, after having him open the scriptures to them over the course of 40 days, and then after watching him ascend to the Father in heaven they would not still be sitting behind locked doors. Oh, I know that Jesus conveniently told them to wait, but how did they do that when they had just experienced what they had experienced? How could they just sit on their hands for 10 days and wait after everything they have just been through? But then again, how do you do that? How do I do that? How

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<sup>1</sup> Robert E. Quinn, Deep Change, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1996, p. 3

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 3

do we walk naked into the land of uncertainty? How do we abandon everything we have ever been taught and do that new thing that God has in store for us? I guess that is where the story of what happened on the day of Pentecost really comes in handy.

Before we get to that story, however, we need to engage in a bit of amateur psychology. Please do not attempt this at home, as it is always dangerous. For what it is worth, however, here is my take: For most of their lives the people gathered in that upper room had been nothing more than learners and followers. Whether it was listening to their elders teach them how to fish or listening to their rabbis teach them how to live, those in that upper room had always been learners and followers. Now there is nothing wrong with that. There is nothing that says people can't spend their lives being good learners and followers. Perhaps that is why Jesus chose them in the first place. He came to them and called them to follow behind and learn from him. Once they accepted that call, he offered them the reign of God. He showed them the power of God. He provided them the amazing grace of God. For three years they learned and followed—that same thing they had been very good at doing their entire lives. But now they were being asked to make a deep change. Now they were being asked to abandon all their well-known techniques and abilities, leave the comfort of home, and step out completely in faith. Jesus asked them to be his witnesses “in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” And oh, please don't forget that the New Testament word for witness is “martyr.” Now taking all of that into consideration, and using my very limited psychological and analytical skills, I think I may have a better understanding of why they were still holed up in that upper room. Change is always frightening. Risk-taking is, well, risky. Quinn's line pretty much sums up the way that I think Jesus was asking them to live the rest of their lives:

“Walking naked into the land of uncertainty.”

We all prefer the security of that upper room, don't we? We all feel so much more comfortable when we can operate out of those familiar techniques and abilities, those comfortable values and assumptions, and those well-worn rules and competencies that we

have learned and acquired down through life. Those are the things that make us what we are. That is why, I believe, the stories of those who actually do bust out of their upper rooms are always some of our favorite. Abraham left the security of his father's house and set out for a land armed only with a promise. Moses left the safety of his father-in-law's herd to go and confront the mighty Pharaoh. Gideon left the protection of the threshing floor to move forward and face the Midianites. And when everyone else feared the great giant, the little shepherd boy David—armed only with a slingshot—walked naked into that land of uncertainty. We are grateful that Abraham, Moses, Gideon, David and so many others like them took those risks. But it is different with us, isn't it? Putting aside everything we know is a truly terrifying thing to do. After all, we know that there is more than a 50-50 chance of failure. That is why most of us prefer the security of those familiar ways in which we have always operated. That is why most of us will deny that there is really any need to ever do things differently. There is a song entitled "Voice of Truth" by the group "Casting Crowns" that speaks to this. Part of that song goes like this:

*Oh what I would do to have  
The kind of strength it takes to stand before a giant  
With just a sling and a stone  
Surrounded by a thousand warriors  
Shaking in their armor  
Wishing they'd have had the strength to stand*

*But the giant's calling out my name and he laughs at me  
Reminding me of all the times I've tried before and failed  
The giant keeps on telling me  
Time and time again, "Boy you'll never win!  
You'll never win!"<sup>3</sup>*

Oh yes, the giant does keep laughing at us. He knows we're nothing but learners and followers who simply don't have the guts to do what we are being called to do.

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Hall and Steven Curtis Chapman, © 2003 Club Zoo Music/SWECS Music.

Whether it is that giant we face as individuals or that giant we face as the church, we regularly prefer the security of those familiar roles with which we are most comfortable. Yet when and if we do choose to face that giant, when and if we do choose to take that risk, when and if we do choose to walk naked into that land of uncertainty, then as Quinn suggests, “it allows for another kind of learning, a learning that helps us forget what we know and discover what we need.”<sup>4</sup> And forgetting what we know and discovering what we need is really what I believe this day of Pentecost is all about. Do you remember what Luke said happened on that day?

As the 120 sat in that upper room, suddenly from heaven they heard the sound like the rush of a mighty wind. Luke said that sound filled the entire house in which they were sitting. Then, just as suddenly, that audible noise turned into a visible sight. They saw tongues of fire resting upon each one of them, and soon they had the feeling that the fire on their heads was now burning in their bellies. It was at that point in time that the upper room could literally no longer contain what they felt was building up within them. The 120 burst forth into the streets and out into the world, words pouring out of their mouths. Amazingly, everyone around them, no matter what language they spoke, understood what these 120 uneducated hicks from Galilee were saying. And as that which they felt within continued to spew forth, the 120 left everything they had depended upon in the past behind. They left the security of that upper room, the serenity of sitting at their teacher’s feet, and the safety of being nothing more than followers and went out and turned the lives of men and women all over this planet upside down. On that day, on Pentecost day, they forgot what they knew and discovered what they needed. From that day forward, they were:

“Walking naked into the land of uncertainty.”

Yet even though they were in that land, they knew they now had a power and strength they never had before. Let me give you a very personal example of what I mean by that. Twenty-five years ago today, I preached the sermon at my father’s funeral. He

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 12

had died a few days before, on Mother's Day of 1983, after a long battle with cancer. I'm not sure who it was, maybe my mom or my grandma, but someone asked me to do the sermon. In a moment of complete insanity, I agreed to do so. I remember very vividly walking into the sanctuary of my home church, sitting down, and looking out into the congregation. Filling the first six rows of pews were all the members of my family—and they were all looking at me. There was my brother, sister, aunts, uncles, cousins, in-laws, and outlaws of various types. I clearly remember thinking to myself that I was absolutely crazy for agreeing to do this. My heart was racing a mile a minute. Although I had done a few funerals before, this one was for my dad. So I closed my eyes and tried to remember everything I had been taught in preaching class about public speaking. I went through all the techniques that I had learned to calm myself down. I ran through my sermon notes in my head to try to distract me from what was coming. I tried not to make eye contact with anyone in the crowd, especially not my mom or my grandma or my Uncle Bill. But nothing was working. When the senior pastor finished his part of the service, he looked over at me, smiled, and nodded. I, in turn, panicked. There were five steps that you had to climb to get into the old First Church pulpit, and the way I was feeling, it might as well been 100. When I finally reached the top, my knees were shaking uncontrollably. I looked out over the congregation and offered a feeble, silent prayer. As Robert Quinn might say, I was definitely:

“Walking naked into the land of uncertainty.”

What happened next is something that I have never forgotten. As I stood there white-knuckling the top of the pulpit for dear life, I suddenly heard from heaven a sound like the rush of a mighty wind. I don't know if anybody else heard it, but I did. Then I looked and I saw the glow of a tongue of fire that seemed as if it was coming from the top of my head. I don't know if anyone else saw it, but I did. And as that glow brightened, and as I began to feel that same fire now burning in my belly, I felt myself began to speak. Words became coming out of my mouth. I think they were English. I don't really remember what I said. I don't really know if it was any good—although it may be important for you to know that neither my mom nor my grandma wrote me out of the will

after I was done. All I knew was that it seemed as if someone or something was causing me to speak, actually forcing words and phrases to come out of my mouth. I began to feel a presence next to me, around me, and within me; a presence that, to this point in my life, has never left me. And with that presence, I had the ability to do what I never would have thought of doing before. Now some might call what happened that day not the rush of a mighty wind, but merely the rush of adrenalin. Some might simply say that I did nothing more than rise to the occasion. But I will never, ever believe them. On that day, you see, I underwent a deep, deep change. Pentecost, my Pentecost, had happened. On that day, 25 years ago today, I forgot everything I knew and discovered exactly what I need.

“Walking naked into the land of uncertainty.”

This day of Pentecost tells us that we need no longer fear when we hear the call to go into that very uncertain land. This day of Pentecost tells us that we need no longer simply need to stay holed up in that upper room and do what we always have done. Whether it is as individual Christians or as the church of Jesus Christ or as the congregation known as Elkhorn Hills, this day of Pentecost invites us to forget what we know and discover what we need. Oh, it is frightening to take that risk. It is frightening to be called to go out and completely expose yourself to those giants that await you. Just ask Peter how he felt as he left the security of his fishing boat behind him and boarded that ship for Rome. Just ask Martin Luther how he felt as he nailed his 95 complaints against Rome to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral. Just ask Mother Teresa how she felt as she stepped off the train and into the streets of Calcutta. These were things that were completely risky, things that left them completely vulnerable, things that they had never, ever done before. Yet by doing so each of them forgot what they knew and discovered what they needed. And nothing in this world has ever again been the same.

“Walking naked into the land of uncertainty.”

Those who wrote the song I mentioned earlier must have known that fear of walking into that uncertain land. They must have understood that the voices of the giants

were constantly yelling at them. But they also seemed to know the truth that this day of Pentecost brings us. For after listening to it all, they were able to affirm:

*But the voice of truth tells me a different story  
The voice of truth says, "Do not be afraid!"  
And the voice of truth says, "This is for my glory"  
Out of all the voices calling out to me  
I will choose to listen and believe the voice of truth*

Let's bow our heads.