# THREE GOING ON FOUR

## Acts 2:1-4

## Trinity Sunday, 2006

Another Annual Conference is history. When the pastoral appointments were read last Wednesday, I was re-appointed to serve this church for a fourth year. Actually, today is the last Sunday of the third year. Next Sunday officially begins our fourth year together. While I am pleased to know we are continuing together as Pastor and congregation, I would be less than honest if I did not confess how frightening it was to come here three years ago. After talking with a lot of people including some of you, I knew that I was coming into a church community that was broken. A lot of things which should not have happened had happened. A lot of things were said which would have been better left unsaid. People were walking in guarded relationships instead of loving relationships. "It's like walking on egg shells around here," I was told by more than one. In those first few weeks I sat down in one-on-one conversations with one church leader after another who told me, "We are divided and we need healing." Trust me when I say, "I was more than a bit frightened when I came here that first Sunday in June of 2003." And of course, you as a congregation were frightened as well because the man who stood before you that first Sunday was an unknown stranger.

As we look at things after three years, we can see evidence that once again our church is facing in the right direction. And make no mistake, the direction a church faces in an important thing. Mr. Frank Jordan taught me that lesson back in the late '70's when I pastored the Talbotton Church in west Georgia. Mr. Jordan was a 75-year old peach farmer. Every few years he would dig up part of his peach orchard to plant new trees, tress which he told me would not produce a crop for seven years. I guess I said something about a 75-year old man planting tress that would not produce for seven years because he told me, "I may not live to see any of the peaches, but when I die, I want my children to know I was pointed in the right direction." The direction our church faces is important. Even if we are not around to see where facing in the right direction takes us, the direction we face is still important in the present moment. The church can face toward internal chaos or community. It can face toward survival or growth. It can face toward things as they are or an ever-changing future.

As we come to this three-year juncture in the journey, it is good to see signs that we are once again pointing in the right direction. Our average attendance at worship which plummeted down to around 370 has once again risen to over 400. Last year we received 86 new members with 20% of them by profession of faith. In a report this past week at Conference it was stated that over 40% of the churches in our conferences did not have one profession of faith, not one baptism, last year. How grateful we are not to be a part of that statistic! Our giving level for the first half of the year has been higher than any recent year. In these three years we have added three key program staff members who

add greatly to what happens here. Most recently we made the difficult decision to go to a full-time music ministry. Week after week we see the upside of that decision. We have seen a new day in missions in our community and world through the Way Station, Soup Kitchen, mission teams to places like Romania and Guatemala, and a truck load of supplies and people going to do relief work on the Gulf Coast. And work is currently underway to restore unusable space for the ministry of our church.

I am like you. I feel good about what we have seen happening in these recent years. We have made decisions to work together. God has brought blessings to us that are really far beyond any we deserve. Yet, to be honest, I find more to be frightened about in this day than three years ago. While I have been in several growing communities, I have never been in a place surrounded by what can only be described as exploding growth. We will not be able to respond to this exploding opportunity for ministry by doing things according to the patterns of the past. If the church is to be faithful, it must discover new ways to respond to what God is putting before us. To paraphrase the old peach farmer, "How can we be sure we are facing in the right direction?"

Our text from the story of Pentecost gives us some help. Let us listen to it once more as a way of bringing it back in view:

> When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together
> in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound
> like a rush of 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 the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other
> languages, as the Sprit gave them ability.

The one thing which leaps from the words of the story is the fact that none of this was what those folks expected. Jesus had told them just before He ascended to

> …. Stay in the city until you have been clothed
> with power from on high. (Luke 24:49)

Before the day of Pentecost they had spent ten days in prayer. They were starting to get comfortable with their routines and patterns of prayer. They were starting to get comfortable with their place in the room and who was praying on either side of them. Not sure what Jesus meant when He spoke of being clothed with power from on high, some may have decided it was going to be a robe like Jesus wore when He disappeared in the clouds. One thing is certain. That story about wind and fire is not a description of what the disciples expected. It was not the result of some carefully planned program. Actually, it was not in accordance with any of their expectations. God did something new and unique with the people of God on that day. Can we believe that He still desires to do something new and unique with the people of God? Can we believe that He desires to do something new and unique with us?

If we dare say "Yes" then it will be necessary for us to throw away our personal expectations of how the church should look and what it should do in favor of seeing what God wants to do with us. It will mean turning loose of our agendas of control. It will mean embracing a church which is not according to our expectations. Here lies one of

the real problems for us. It is extremely difficult for us to think about a ministry outside of the practices and patterns of the past. Being able to think "out of the box," daring to step outside our comfort zones is not something we do very well. We try to do ministries as we face the past instead of the future. The practices and patterns of the past, the systems we have used for a ministry have taken us where we are today and if we continue using them in the future, they will not take us to a new place but to the same place.

What is it that is so frightening about this present moment? I fear we will try to impose yesterday's structures for ministry upon tomorrow's challenges. I fear we will try to shape the church of tomorrow with our memories of the church of yesterday. As we think about the future, I fear we already have our notions of what must happen and our images of how the church must look. I fear that we will work toward making our expectations reality instead of seeking out what may be the surprising and unpredictable expectations of the Holy Spirit. But, most of all, I fear we will miss out on the opportunity to reach people for Christ and help them become connected to a vital life-giving faith.

As I keep looking at those few verses from the story of Pentecost, a picture comes into view which is hard to reconcile with our view of how things get done in churches. The people did not have any committees, task forces, or study groups to map out the future. All the people did was show up. Jesus said to hang around until something out of the ordinary happened and they did. The primary player in the future of the church was not Peter or John, nor was it the collective wisdom of the people of God. God through the person of the Holy Spirit was the primary player. Through their devotion to prayer the people made themselves ready for whatever it was that God was going to do in their midst.

As I start this fourth year, I am convinced that God's plans for this church are bigger than ours. What is going to be required of us is our best as a church. Only our best as the people of God will be enough. So, I want to ask for your prayers. When we started our life together three years ago as pastor and people, we committed ourselves to a season of prayer. As we stand at this moment of moving toward what will be one of the most challenging moments in the life of our church, it only seems appropriate that we pray once more. We can never be our best, nor can we become our best without praying. I want to ask you to pray for me as I commit myself to be the leader He has put me here to be. I do not ask you to pray that I would be the leader of my expectations or yours, but that I would be a spiritual leader according to God's expectations. I want to ask you to pray asking God what He wants you to do in this important moment in the life of this church. I want to ask you to ask God to bless this church with a unity that gives negative and undermining words no place. And if you do hear negative and undermining words in this place, I want you to take authority to say, "We no longer have room for such spirits here." I want to ask you to pray that we will become not the church of our expectations, but that we will become the church that is always being surprised by what the Holy Spirit is doing in our midst.

This sermon preached by the Rev. Bill Strickland at the Richmond Hill United Methodist Church in Richmond Hill, Georgia on June 11, 2006.