

100 Percent Chance of Reign

Acts 2:1-21

Wayne Eberly
Pentecost Sunday, May 15, 2016

The forecast for rain was one hundred percent. God told it to Noah in Genesis 6. He said, “I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth.” The forecast was accurate. Indeed, it was one hundred percent chance of rain. “The springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened. It rained forty days and forty nights.” The forecast was one hundred percent chance of rain. Noah heard the forecast and built an ark. But everyone else ignored the forecast. One hundred percent chance of rain and people ignored the forecast. They ignored the forecast to their great demise. If you want to know more about the story of Noah and the Ark, come here Sunday morning, June 5, as our youth present a musical at the 10 am service. The title of the musical is...One Hundred Percent Chance of Rain.

Ever since Sally Owen announced with a beaming smile that the youth were doing a musical and that the title was One Hundred Percent Chance of Rain, that phrase has been running through my mind. Now today, on Pentecost, I get to use that same title. But there is one difference. Here, reign refers to the God who rules the heavens and the earth, not to those little drops of water that fall from the sky. The Book of Acts has a forecast that pretty much says there is One Hundred Percent Chance of Reign. Jesus Christ came to the earth, and Luke told us all about that in his gospel. Jesus brought the good news of the kingdom, lives were changed and transformed, healed and made whole, sins were forgiven and the lost were found. These were all signs that the kingdom of God had come to this earth. Even his death on the cross...especially his death on the cross, was one more sign of the presence and the power of the kingdom of God. The death of Jesus was actually a victory over the powers of sin, the powers of evil, and the powers of death and the devil. Along with being a victory over the powers of this world, the death of Jesus was God’s means of bringing salvation, hope, and new life. But how do we know all these things related to Jesus prove that God is sovereign, that God reigns? God raised Jesus from the dead. That is God’s proof that his power has been demonstrated in Jesus, and that his power rules the heavens and the earth.

Acts begins with the forecast that there is One Hundred Percent Chance of Reign. Jesus is alive and walking and talking with his disciples. But he is soon to ascend to heaven, where he will sit at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. He reigns. Yes indeed, Jesus Christ reigns. Before he ascends to heaven he tells his disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the gift that God has promised, the gift of the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit comes the disciples will receive power, and in the power of the Holy Spirit they will be witnesses, right where they are in Jerusalem, and then in an ever expanding sphere of influence they will witness to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. Their witness, their testimony, is that Jesus Christ is Lord. Jesus reigns.

On the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descends on the disciples, it is just further confirmation that the forecast is accurate. One Hundred Percent Chance of Reign. A violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house. Tongues of fire came to rest on each of them. As they were filled with the Holy Spirit they began to speak in other tongues. Not only has Jesus been raised to new life, so have his disciples. They have been raised to life as they are filled with the Holy Spirit. The forecast was right on target. One Hundred Percent Chance of Reign.

But just like in the days of Noah, some didn't get it. They either ignored the forecast or they refused to believe it or they saw it and chose to make fun, saying, "They have had too much wine." Acts tells us a powerful story that Jesus reigns. Acts also tells us the troubling story that not everyone understands, not everyone believes, and not everyone submits to the power and the authority of Jesus. And yet none of the doubts, none of the disbelief, none of the disobedience changes the forecast. It doesn't change the forecast one single bit. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. Jesus Christ reigns.

A pastor was speaking at our presbytery meeting last Saturday. He is an African American pastor, and he was recounting some work he did with a prison ministry. A place like a prison could make you start to wonder if Jesus really does reign. I guess you see some pretty rough and ugly stuff. I guess you see things that could make you lose hope. This African American pastor showed up one day to do his work as a chaplain at the prison. He was working with another pastor and when they showed up they were told one of

the inmates had a brother who had been shot and killed. One of them had to go and tell the inmate the news about his brother. The other pastor said to the African American pastor, "You go and tell him the news." Dragging his feet, feeling like he got the short straw, the African American pastor went and found the man to tell him the news. It turns out the man was a big man. He stood 6'7" tall. He was white. And he was covered with tattoos, including several swastikas. The African American pastor walked up to this huge white man covered with swastikas and other tattoos and he said, "I'm sorry to tell you that your brother was shot and killed. He has died." He said the bad news and then almost took a step back and waited for the response. The huge white man with swastikas on his body looked at the black pastor and he said, "Will you pray with me?" They prayed together. And then the man said, "Will you hug me?" As the black pastor told the story I confess I didn't see that coming. But right there in a prison the forecast was absolutely true. One Hundred Percent Chance of Reign.

As he left the black pastor met his fellow pastor who had sent him in to do the tough job. When he told the story his fellow pastor, his friend, looked at him and said, "You were Jesus to him." But the black pastor didn't see it that way. He said, "No, he was Jesus to me." On that day, at that moment, in the bowels of that prison, somehow God broke through and made it clear that the forecast is absolutely accurate. One Hundred Percent Chance of Reign.

When Jesus tells his disciples they will be witnesses to the ends of the earth, he is telling them there is no corner of this planet, no country on the map, no group of people on this earth, no individual on this whole wide world, who is outside the reign of God. And that amazing miracle that some mistook for drunkenness, that outpouring of the Holy Spirit that led to the disciples speaking in all these different languages, was a sign and a symbol that people of every tribe and every tongue would one day know the good news that Jesus reigns, and that in him is life, and that life is abundant. Because Jesus reigns over all the earth a town in Samaria, Samaria which was always in opposition to the people of Israel, Samaritans in Samaria received the gospel and received the Holy Spirit. Because Jesus reigns, an Ethiopian, we assume a person with dark skin, heard the good news from Isaiah 53 about a sheep that went to the slaughter, about a lamb who was silent before its shearers, about one who by the wounds he suffered brought healing and forgiveness for others...this Ethiopian received the gospel and

was baptized. Because Jesus reigns Peter finally got the message after three separate visions that he, a Jew, was supposed to go to the home of Cornelius, a Gentile, and share the gospel with him. Because Jesus reigns, an enemy of Christ named Saul was met by Christ and his whole life changed. Saul became Paul and Paul became a preacher who shared the good news that Jesus Christ tears down the dividing walls between human beings. Paul shared the good news that in Jesus Christ there is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, there is just one human race, a human race that is rescued by God and redeemed by God and made whole by God and loved by God. Because Jesus reigns, a black pastor and white man whose body was tattooed with swastikas prayed in the bowels of a prison and then hugged one another.

When we are told that there is One Hundred Percent Chance of Reign we are given a vision for how people might come together and live in unity and live in community. In Acts 2 and later in Acts 4 those who have believed in the Jesus who reigns come together and truly share their lives. They open their homes. They share their resources. They look out for one another. They sacrifice for one another. They love one another. At one point, capturing what it will look like on that great day when heaven and earth become one and the reign of God finally sweeps us all up into the fullness of God's grace, we are told there were no needy persons among them.

Because Jesus reigns this congregation has joined with others to start a ministry called Family Housing Support. Homeless families with children are placed in apartments, they are surrounded with wrap-around services which help them grow in independence and self-sufficiency, and we are soon to open a third apartment. Yesterday we came alongside others who believe Jesus reigns to dedicate a Habitat for Humanity home. A family will have a home to live in, and it will be a home they own. What we were blessed to share in yesterday is something that has touched the lives of 6.8 million people who have moved into a home in places all over this world. That includes countries in the Caribbean and Latin America, in Africa and the Middle East, in Europe and Central Asia, in Asia and the Pacific, and in North America. That is what it means to say there is One Hundred Percent Chance of Reign. It is small like three apartments in a small corner of Rhode Island, or a single house in Charlestown. And it is global and universal like homes all over the world, and then it shrinks back down to a kitchen in

downtown Westerly where the faithful members of Dunn's Corners prepare a meal once a month for some who are homeless or facing a difficult time in life. Jesus reigns and there are signs of it everywhere.

There is a ministry in Texas that works with children who for some reason are not able to live with their biological families. They have group homes. They also offer a ministry for single parents and their children. It is just the kind of thing our church embraces here. One day I received a letter from one of the single moms who had been helped by this ministry. She wrote:

I can honestly say if it weren't for this program, my children and I would probably be living in my car or worse. If I hadn't been rescued, I would've lost my job and perhaps my beautiful son and daughter too. Through this program, my family was provided with a safe place to live, and they treated me with dignity. From the first day, I set my own goals, which, for me was to focus on keeping my job, build up a savings of at least \$2,000, and obtain a permanent place for us to live. I worked regularly with the Program Director to improve my skills in so many areas. We had regular counseling sessions, educational opportunities, instruction in parenting and also instruction in life skills (like how to eat healthy on a budget, how to manage overall household financials, and time management skills). We were also embraced by wonderful volunteers who expressed unconditional love, time and time again.

I am so excited to say that I have graduated from this program! My children and I live in our own apartment and we are making it on our own. I still have dreams of going to college and am making plans to start soon. It's been such a long time since I've been able to say this, but my future, again, looks so bright! We all go through seasons of our lives; some are full of sorrows while others are full of joys. What this Single Parent Family Program did for me was to provide the support I needed to move on to my next season of life and pave an entire road for my children. We are headed in the right direction, God is good, and I am not a failure! Because Jesus reigns, people find their lives going in a new direction, they find hope for their future, and they discover they are not a failure. Friends, that is the kingdom of heaven, and one day it will be clear to everyone that Jesus Christ is Lord. He reigns.

I told you this ministry also has group homes for children where they can live if their home life doesn't work out. A college president was visiting our church and when she heard we supported this ministry she shared a short note one of the students at the college wrote as she prepared to graduate. This young woman had grown up in one of the group homes, surrounded by people who believe Jesus reigns and who shared with this young woman the value and significance of her life. The young woman wrote:

The words “after graduation” may be daunting for some, but I have so many plans that I can't wait to get started! I have applied for an English Teaching Assistantship at Columbia University with the Fulbright program. After my teaching assistantship I will apply for a position with Teach for America and hope to teach in a bilingual elementary school in Dallas. I will also attend Southern Methodist University to earn a master's degree in teaching. One young woman experiences the reign of God and now she is headed to a career as a bilingual teacher with Teach for America. She wants to help other young children and teens discover the hope and purpose that come from living in a world where Jesus Christ in all of his grace and glory reigns.

Today as we have placed ourselves right into the middle of a scene that might seem the epitome of chaos, people speaking in different tongues as the Spirit of God overwhelms their hearts, we find today is actually a day to cement in our minds the beauty and the glory and the majesty and the hope and the promise of what God has in store for us. It is One Hundred Percent Chance of Reign. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. Jesus Christ is exalted to the right hand of the Father in Heave. Jesus Christ reigns.

If you knew there was One Hundred Percent Chance of Rain...wouldn't you prepare yourself to go outdoors with an umbrella and a raincoat and boots? We would be prepared for the rain. Friends, let us go out into this world, this world where Jesus Christ has risen from the dead and the Holy Spirit has anointed our lives, let us go out prepared for One Hundred Percent Chance of Reign. Everywhere we look, everywhere we go, every person we meet, is under the reign of God. Do we believe that? Do we look for that? Are we open to that? Everywhere. Every single place. Every single person. And when we do see the reign of God in ways we recognize, let us celebrate and give thanks.

Back in February I received a message that June Wilson's daughter, who lives out of state, was going to be in town and she wondered if she could take part in worship while she was here. June's daughter plays the bagpipes, and she wanted to know if she could play the bagpipes in our worship service. I wasn't sure what to do, so I handed it off to Andy. I said, "Is there some way we can make this work?" Well, the Sunday came, and June was front and center at the 10 am service. June had been in and out of the hospital, and so her being in worship was a big deal. Word had spread among June's family and friends and there was a large contingent who showed up that morning. What Andy arranged was that when we came to the hymn Amazing Grace, which we were singing that morning, June's daughter would lead us in singing as she played the bagpipes. You should have seen June's face when she heard the pipes...and when she turned and saw her daughter. And you should have seen our faces as we saw June, and we saw her daughter, and we sang those beautiful words about once being lost...and then by the grace of God...by God's amazing grace...being found. June died just two days later. When I heard June had died that particular Sunday, with that particular song, played by June's very own daughter took on added significance. It doesn't always happen, and we don't always notice it when it does happen, but the reign of God and God's amazing grace meets us with some powerful reminders that Jesus is Lord. Pentecost has forecast One Hundred Percent Chance of Reign. People of God, may we open our eyes, our ears, our minds, and our hearts so that we notice the many ways, both big and small, where God allows us the privilege of seeing his reign in ways we understand, in ways that warm our hearts, and in ways that cause us to bow down before this God who is Lord of heaven and of earth.

I wish I was better at remembering the forecast. I wish I did a better job of waking up each morning and paying attention to all the ways God is at work. Too often I'm not paying attention, I'm clueless. I miss what God is doing. Years ago I got home from work late in the afternoon and Julie greeted me at the front door. She said, "Go in the kitchen and make some cookies. A family moved into the neighborhood and I want us to take them some cookies to welcome them." I wish I could tell you I rushed into the kitchen, whipped up some cookies with a joyful smile and an expectant spirit for what wondrous deeds God would perform. The truth is I grumbled and made excuses and tried to talk Julie out of it. She ignored my protests and firmly

said, “Do it.” I did it. As I made the cookies Julie let me in on part of her desire to welcome the family. They had California license plates on their car. We had moved to Houston from California about a year before, so when she saw California plates she said, “We have to welcome this family.”

We knocked on the door of the house. The wife opened the door. We held out the cookies and said, “Welcome to Houston.” Julie proceeded to explain that we also had recently moved from California. As she often does, she said, “And my husband’s a Presbyterian pastor.” The woman’s eyes grew wide. In a quiet voice she said her family had prayed at dinner that very night that God would help them find a church home. The next Sunday Linda and her family showed up at church. With a big smile she said right after we visited her home, she received a letter from a friend in California. The letter said, “Our friends Wayne and Julie Eberly just moved to Houston. We know Houston is a huge city, but we hope you will meet them and maybe attend their church.” They came to church. They joined the church. Their children joined the church. They served as elders in the church. And this fall they came and visited us in our new home. When the wife walked in the first thing she said was, “Do you remember the chocolate chip cookie?” Do I ever! I was not expecting reign when Julie said go make some cookies. But friends, reign is always in our forecast. Reign is always in our forecast because Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. Reign is always in our forecast because the Holy Spirit has filled our lives. There is always One Hundred Percent Chance of Reign. Jesus Christ is Lord of heaven and earth. He reigns. He reigns now and forevermore. Hallelujah! Thanks be to God!