

Of Pentecost and the Pandemicⁱ

John Wilkinson

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

May 31, 2020 (The Day of Pentecost)

Acts 2:1-21

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us. Amen.

In a broken and fearful world, the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing.

If you hear, or remember, nothing else, hear this, remember this: In a broken and fearful world, the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing. One line from the most recent Presbyterian creed, adapted from I Thessalonians; we will share it together in a few moments. But it is more than that. A beacon. An anchor. In a broken and fearful world, the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing.

We began this COVID-19 odyssey in Lent. It continued through Holy Week, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter. It processed through Ascension Sunday a week ago. Now we complete the cycle, in a way, or more rightly, enter into the ongoing rhythm, cadence, of life with Jesus. Birth to ministry to betrayal to death to resurrection to ascension – and now, the coming of the Holy Spirit, as Jesus promised, on Pentecost.

Pentecost, a Jewish festival happening some 50 days – hence the name Pentecost – after Passover, and now for we Christians, happening some 50 days after Easter. Pentecost is fundamental, a pivot point and a turning point, an ending and a beginning. And it is widely and wildly misunderstood, especially by we Protestants and Presbyterians, often called God's frozen people.

Fifty days after Easter, we find ourselves in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. You will remember the story, even as you are challenged by it. Gathered in Jerusalem, a sound, a violent wind came over the crowd. Tongues of fire descended. All sorts of chaos followed, culminated by the ability to speak and understand unfamiliar languages.

The people observing all this have a range of responses. Some are amazed. Some think they are simply drunk. Peter, with Jesus from the beginning and the leader now, makes a big speech explaining and interpreting to all. No drunkenness, he insists, but rather the playing out of the prophet Joel's prophecy. God is pouring out God's Spirit. Old and young alike shall dream dreams and see visions.

What does this mean, they asked, those who were curious, those who were skeptical, those who were compelled in some way. What does this mean? We ask the same thing. What does this mean?

James Van Tholen wrote: "...we do fine with events like Lent and Easter and Labor Day, but we get a little queasy on Pentecost...when possessing the Holy Spirit is so often identified with possessing special powers or insight or losing control of our actions or speech. Most of us don't know the Spirit that way; most of us are embarrassingly calm. So we celebrate Pentecost, but it doesn't always seem like a good fit for us." ("Home Is Where the Spirit Is," in *Where All Hope Lies*, page 135)

We grant that it was a pivotal day in the New Testament's unfolding story of the church. We grant its central role in our story, even if we do not fully understand it. Still...what does it mean?

What this means, Peter says, is that those words from the tradition are unfolding in real-time, right here, right now – God's Spirit is being poured out upon us.

What this means, Peter says, is that the Spirit is giving us that power as well, to continue Jesus' work of transformation. We are to prophesy. We are to dream. We are to know the truth, and tell it, about ourselves, our church, our community, our world. We are not to be simply critics, but prophets, measuring all that is by the yardstick of God's vision. And then we are to dream. How does God intend things to be? What is God's vision? And how do we get there, by the Spirit and power of God? Because the Spirit has been given to us, we may speak the Spirit-filled truth as to how things are. And because the Spirit has been given to us, we may imagine with the Spirit how things may be.

Beverly Gaventa writes of the Acts account that "Pentecost is the moment when gestation ceases and birthing occurs. Thus, it is both an end and a beginning, the leaving behind of that which is past, the launching forth into that which is only now beginning to be." (*Texts for Preaching, Year B*, page 347)

Our Pentecost plans did not include a global pandemic. But we would be unfaithful to say that Pentecost has nothing to say to this pandemic. In fact, Pentecost has everything to say to this moment in time.

To encounter the Pentecost story again is to recover several foundational truths.

Unity. Not uniformity, but unity. Diversity, we would call it, an inclusiveness that affirms diversity of race and language and culture and tradition as a beautiful thing. We hunger for that unity now – nationally, culturally. The Spirit of Pentecost offers it.

Empowerment and giftedness. Peter reaches back into the tradition to remind us of God's vision – all ages, all genders, all social standings, all will have God's Spirit poured out upon them. No exception. All empowered. And not only are they, and we, empowered, but we are given gifts to enact that empowerment. And a road map. The gifts to look around and see what is and the gift to dream what may be.

And a vision. There are many ways to articulate it – here's what that same Brief Statement says – all are accepted, all are loved, all have a voice, all are heard – justice, freedom and peace prevails.

We claim that unity, that empowerment, that giftedness, to be sure. But we know that in 2020, as in year 1 for the church, it is not easy. It is not easy, maybe always, but certainly right now, to dream that dream, to envision that vision. Like that moment and those people we share a mixture of wonder and fear, astonishment and perplexity, hope and doubt.

But remember...In a broken and fearful world, the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing.

Or...in an anxious and uncertain world, a mask-wearing, Zoom-meeting, curve-flattening world, in the face of a virus that continues to kill, the Spirit gives us the capacity to live each day, somehow, isolated, stressed, medically uncertain, economically precarious, politically fractured, to persevere with forbearance and fortitude.

Or...In a timid, passive, shrug-your-shoulders world, the Spirit gives us the mandate to fight injustice and oppression.

More to the point, in a racist world, the Spirit compels us to fight and dismantle racism. In Atlanta, a black jogger named Ahmaud Arbery is hunted down and executed. This week, a white woman in a Manhattan park called the police to report – falsely, devastatingly falsely – that an African-American man was threatening her. In Minneapolis, George Floyd was killed by an MPD police officer, while recorded, igniting a powder keg.

What is the Spirit saying to me, to us, to we who are white, about the need first to confess, to educate ourselves on systemic racism, white supremacy and white fragility, and privilege, and then do something. We must do the work, as they say, and then back up our words with action. A holy calling, a Pentecostal mandate.

Our Pentecost plans did not include a global pandemic. But Pentecost equips us to deal with, to live with, a global pandemic. And systemic racism. And every kind of fear and uncertainty and anxiety. *If we will let it.*

I will place my money on Pentecost every time. Not lightly, certainly not lightly in the face of 101,000 deaths with more to come, and all the attendant grief and trauma, and incredible national tension on re-opening and massive economic distress and second waves *and* virulent, lethal racism.

So not lightly at all. But if we take what the Spirit offers us – unity, empowerment, giftedness, and if we rely on the courage the Spirit gives us, we can navigate this moment and live into that vision. That’s what Jesus promises and that’s what the Spirit delivers.

My friend Jill Duffield, the editor of the *Presbyterian Outlook*, writes that “Pentecost is revolutionary because the wind blows down barriers and the flames burn down walls between peoples separated by geography, culture, language, nation, class, race and every other human-created category....”

Jill concludes: “Pentecost is revolutionary, turning upside down and inside out every human-constructed category, divide and barrier to God's constituting one family.”

Theologian Jürgen Moltmann writes that life in the Spirit means that we are “born again to a living hope,” and that new hope makes us a citizen of the kingdom, setting us in the common movement of the Spirit which is poured out on all people. (*The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, page 278-279)

Bill Wylie Kellerman writes that “The question to which Pentecost comes as bold answer is this: Will (we) be ruled by fear? Will (we) be contained and confined? Rendered timid and silent? Pentecost says no.” (*Seasons of Faith and Conscience*, pages 200-201)

The people gathered; winds blew; flames descended; languages were understood; dreams and visions were given voice. What does this mean, the onlookers asked? Here is what it means: in a broken and fearful world, the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing.

“O Holy Spirit, whose presence is liberty, grant us that freedom of the Spirit which will not fear to tread in unknown ways, nor be held back by misgivings of ourselves and fear of others. Ever beckon us forward to the place of thy will which is also the place of thy power. Amen.” (Prayer attributed to George Appleton)

ⁱ This letter was sent to the congregation on the morning of May 31, 2020.

Dear PCCH Members and Friends,

"When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them." (Acts 2)

There are times when the truth of scripture collides with events unfolding in our world in such a way as to astonish and perplex us.

We watched Friday night and Saturday as cities across the U.S., including our city, Philadelphia, experienced protests and demonstrations, and then curfews, as violence broke out. We pray for peace in our cities.

Those protests and demonstrations followed the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, and more so, the recent deaths of Ahmaud Arbery in Atlanta and Breonna Taylor in Louisville, and so many before them. We pray for justice.

And we pray that we -- individually and collectively -- can commit ourselves in deeper ways to dismantle racism, looking first at our own lives and then at church and society. Thoughts and prayers must lead to action. That is what the Spirit is telling us.

The account of the first Pentecost concludes with Peter's reference to the prophet Joel -- "your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams...

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

As we gather for worship this morning, may we confess, lament, and heed the prophet's word.

Faithfully,

John Wilkinson