
Come Holy Spirit

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The Reverend Canon Beth Knowlton
Feast of the Pentecost
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The Cathedral of St. Philip
John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

A number of months ago, one of the spiritual direction groups I meet with had a session on how to pray with icons. I brought in a few examples and gave people time to imagine themselves in the scene and to let their prayer time be formed by the image before them.

One of the examples was a Byzantine icon of the Pentecost. Mary is in the center surrounded by the apostles. The colors are boldly red and yellow. Very controlled, uniform tongues of fire sit neatly above each person's gold-encrusted head. At the top we see a descending white dove with measured and contained flames fanning out in all directions.

Now one of the things I love about these groups is the unexpected insights people find during times of quiet and reflection. After I rang the chime to signal the end of our silence I wondered what the comments would be. How had the Holy Spirit moved during this time?

After a pregnant pause one voice said, "I'm not sure what we were supposed to get out of this, but I stopped looking at it pretty quickly and just enjoyed the quiet." Another said, "The disciples look rather disturbing." A third voice, "This icon is very strange. I can't imagine anyone would ever buy this." And finally, "Why are their necks turned up at 90 degree angles? That looks really uncomfortable." Not exactly what I had expected.

However, to be wrenched from a place of comfort when the Spirit arrives is probably exactly the reaction we should expect. Our necks may not physically be able to handle a ninety degree turn upward, but metaphorically we probably feel at least that dislocated.

If we haven't made the Pentecost service for the past few years, the reading of the gospel this morning might have been a little discomfiting. If you are visiting, you might have had at least had a moment of hesitation. Did I come to the right place? Is this an Episcopal church? Why were people speaking in strange languages? For the more logistically minded we wondered, is the Deacon's microphone broken? Do I need to notify an usher?

For those of us who know what to expect, we can almost feel like small giggling children in on a secret. If we are one of the readers it is as if we are "plants" in the audience at a magic show. We wait for just the right moment to play our part as nonchalantly as possible. We scan the assembly wondering who might be surprised by what we are doing.

But while slightly uncomfortable, this reenactment of the great reversal of the Tower of Babel is controlled. We go from confusion to the calm assuring voice of a gospel we understand upon the second reading. Deacon Fuller's calming tones a few moments after the confusion assure us that indeed we are where we are supposed to be. If there are any vestiges of

discomfort, surely the preacher will tend to those.

But there is nothing terribly calming about the gospel text from John. We listen to Jesus counseling his disciples that he is on the way out. They are filled with sorrow at the knowledge that everything is about to change. The person they have most cared about, most sought out for advice and guidance is leaving. He is going to a certain death. And they don't really know what is to follow.

Jesus does promise the Advocate. But it is not an advocate that will ensure our ongoing peace and prosperity. It is not the promise of an earthly easy life, but one of certain persecution and deeper affinity with the way Jesus' earthly life ended.

And that is just the part of the news Jesus thinks the disciples can bear in that moment of grief.

Like a parent explaining something tragic to us when we are small children, later on we realize it was a tempered story. It was true, but there pieces we would not and could not understand. Jesus reminds us in our journey towards discipleship, that we never commit knowing the full things that will be required. Like baptismal vows, we make them or they are made for us in one point of time. But if we live the baptized life, we come back to them over and over again. We reaffirm, we reclaim, we remember.

There are things we need to hear when the world is turned on its head, but we are not always ready. We cling to the promise of Jesus that it is really to our advantage that he leaves.

But it sure doesn't feel like that at the time.

The southern author, Flannery O'Connor has a deep appreciation of what it is to be confronted by the Holy Spirit. In her short story *Everything that Rises Must Converge* we meet a Caucasian man named Julian on a bus ride with his mother. The story was written in 1961 and is set in the shifting world of southern culture during the civil rights movement. It is a time when everything that the mother and son have known is being turned on its head.

The mother is presented through the eyes of her son and it is not a flattering picture. She is puffed up, physically and morally, and wearing an atrocious hat. It has a "purple velvet flap coming down on one side of it and stands up on the other; the rest of it is green and looks like a cushion with the stuffing out." Julian deems the hat and his mother, "less comical than jaunty and pathetic."

Throughout the ride the son fantasizes about ways to annoy his mother. His chosen vehicle is his progressive nature towards African Americans. He decides to engage them in conversation, not to create genuine community, but to separate himself from his mother by the greatest distance possible.

If he can annoy her in the process, all the better.

He is more than pleased when during the ride a large African American woman ascends the bus with a small child. She is wearing none other than, the same atrocious hat. Julian thinks to himself, "The vision of the two hats, identical broke upon him with the radiance of a brilliant sunrise. His face was suddenly lit with joy. He could not believe Fate had thrust upon his mother such a lesson,."

As the story progresses tensions build and the parties get out at the same stop. Julian knows something is coming. He knows that his mother is about to make a move that will embarrass him.

As they alight from the bus, his mother calls out in her most condescending tone to the young boy, "O little boy! Here is a bright new penny for you." When she does, the African American woman becomes enraged by the gesture and responds O'Connor says "like a piece of machinery that has been given one ounce of pressure too much." She swings her massive red pocketbook and knocks Julian's mother to the ground.

Eventually, Julian helps her up and berates her as they head home. He had warned her not to do that and she had only gotten what she deserved. The world is no longer the same but is now such that people she never imagined can wear the

same hat. What all this means he says is "the old world is gone, the old manners are obsolete and, You aren't who you think you are."

But as they go along it is clear that the mother is gravely injured. She stumbles to the ground and it is only at that point that Julian's disdain gives way to love. "Mother, Darling, sweetheart, wait!" As he turns her over he calls out to her crying Mamma, Mamma!"

Was it to his advantage to be confronted with his own cruelty and unforgiving judgment? Does it open up the possibility of new life for him? Perhaps, but it also seems almost too much to bear. Like the disciples clinging to Jesus, Julian wants to cling to the assumptions of his old life. To be confronted with the death of his mother, and only then see his own arrogance, is a tragic way to look anew.

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come."

The Spirit of Pentecost does not speak to us as individuals. If it did, it would be too much to bear. But the unveiling of truth that comes through this abrupt confrontation is spoken outside of our selves.

It is spoken and mediated to a faithful community. Pentecost is not about our individual revelations, but the revelation that it is not about us. It is not our Advocate that comes upon the scene but The Advocate. The Advocate is not our spiritual personal trainer assigned to be our voice against the world.

The Advocate is meant to be the voice of Jesus. And that is much more likely to feel like a rush of violent wind that leaves us with a cramp in our neck. We may find ourselves lying on the ground wondering where that red purse came from. Or we may be struck by grief that all of our most dearly held assumptions have been brought into question.

We may wish that the spirit was a little less disruptive. We may wish it was a gentle murmuring breeze bearing the scent of honeysuckle. But if Pentecost came that subtly, we might never join the community. We might not need one another. We might not hear the voice of The Advocate.

So instead we gather together, around the waters and pray, "Come Holy Spirit, Come."

Amen

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