

“This is Us. This is America. This is Pentecost.” Acts 2:1-21
Rev. Michele Ward, Pentecost Sunday Sunday, May 31, 2020
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church
Baltimore City, Maryland

Pentecost is here--the one Sunday a year when the Church lets the Holy Spirit out of the closet to join the rest of the Trinity. The Sunday that is sometimes referred to as “the birthday of the church,” because it is the day we celebrate the arrival of the Holy Spirit and the anointing of the church community. But I’m here to tell you a little secret. The Holy Spirit doesn’t need one Sunday a year. You see, the Spirit has been here since the beginning. The Spirit has been here since the moment Genesis tells us that “the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters” before the creation of the world (Genesis 1:2). But what’s different this time is the reason she comes. You see, she’s been here before, showing up as a mighty wind, as a still, small voice to Elijah, as the breath filling up the lungs of Adam and Eve, as the pillar of cloud during the day and the pillar of fire during the night in the wilderness.

This time, God’s Spirit comes to the house where all the faithful Jews had gathered to celebrate Pentecost, the feast fifty days after Passover. When Luke tells us in verse one that they were all together in one place, he was implying that the estimated 120 Jews gathered for the Ascension (Acts 1:15) had stuck together and were waiting for the words Jesus left them with would come true--he told them to stay and wait for their next assignment, that one would come that would fill them with the power to do great things in God’s name, that they would go out into all the world to declare Good News to everyone they met. But for now, they were to obey his command to shelter in place. They were to physically distance themselves from the other Jews celebrating Pentecost and to worship together, with fifteen native languages among them, in fact, and figure out how to do it in a common way.

But before they could even get the festivities started, a sound like rushing wind filled the house. Small fires appeared around them and also landed on every person in the house. People began to speak in languages that they never knew how to speak. Because Jerusalem was a metropolitan city, Jews from all over the world lived there, which meant that dozens of native languages existed in the Jewish community in Jerusalem, particularly during high holy days. A crowd gathered around and outside the house because they could hear the people inside speak on top of each other, and I imagine they could see light of all sorts coming from windows and doors. The crowd heard them all speaking, and ended up with two very different sets of opinions. Some of the people there were full of amazement, asking, “What does this mean?” But other people there heard them speaking and thought they must be drunk.

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To try and clear things up, Peter stands in front of the crowd of people with the other disciples to explain. He tells everyone that the gathered community is not intoxicated, but that they are witnessing a prophecy take place before their very eyes. This is not an out of control party or a drunken riot. This is God at work, plain and simple.

Have you ever witnessed something rowdy or strange or uncomfortable, certain that God could not be at work? I woke up Saturday morning to the sound of teen joy in the high school parking lot across the street from my house. The Baltimore Design School was giving senior high students their caps and gowns for a graduation ceremony they would not have in person any more. The parking lot was full of car horns honking, pop music blasting, families cheering. It was beautiful chaos. I could hear them from all the way on the second floor in the back of the house. A few blocks away from me on the corner of 20th and Charles Street, another kind of noise was being made. The noise of grief, of resistance, of anger. It was a protest bringing together activists and citizens from around the city ending at City Hall. Music, chants, the cry “I can’t breathe” rising up from the peaceful protesters as they make their way to the center of town.

And do we understand the two celebrations yesterday?

Now, I want the Pentecost birthday, everyone. And me, in my white privilege, get to have my Holy Spirit party whenever I want to do it. I can put on my music and turn to celebrating and have every right to do so. Finding joy in the midst of a pandemic--now, more than ever, find your joy, church! We are living through a pandemic But do not do it as a way to escape. Do not do it as a way to avoid or ignore the realities of systemic injustice and sin that surround us, that Jesus came to change and upend.

We can still have our Pentecost celebration this year, and we will. But to simply call it the ‘birthday of the church’ is to dismiss the raw power and strength of the day the Holy Spirit united the people and Peter’s sermon that followed. The Holy Spirit did not come so we can sing a few songs about how comforting and mysterious she is, and then get back to programming as usual. The Holy Spirit came to start a movement. The Holy Spirit came to unite Christ followers across their different languages and backgrounds in order for them to fulfill the prophecy from Joel-- “I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your daughters and your sons shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.”

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We need more than a Holy Spirit birthday party. I am not in the mood for cake and ice cream today, and I have a strong feeling neither is she. She was giving birth to the church on Pentecost, and birth is a mess. The Holy Spirit shows up during a festival and turns it upside down. She comes and blows open windows. She comes and lights fires. She comes to give people the words to say in languages they did not speak before that moment--words of power and of revelation. Birth is sweat and tears and screams and clenched jaws. The Holy Spirit comes so we will know that we are born of wind and of fire, of proclamation and power. The Holy Spirit comes to bring a revolution, but we bottle her up. We contain her to only one Sunday a year because her power is too much for us. Her strength overwhelms and confuses us.

But our birthday plans for today have not gone like we'd thought. We are not in the sanctuary this morning wearing red and singing the songs we love together. Instead, we are in our homes, physically distancing from one another in order to save lives. We are in a pandemic. Police brutality and the murder of black men and women at the hands of officers continues to scourge our nation. Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Ahmaud Aubery, and George Floyd were all murdered in the last two months. And it is for them and the thousands of others that people around our country marched, asking for justice. In her book *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles*, feminist philosopher Dr. Lisa Tessman calls “the sustained anger that drives militant political resistance as a ‘burdened virtue.’ She presents this anger as politically and morally necessary yet crippling to bear [for the resisters], in tension with the enraged resistor’s own flourishing.”¹ Religion scholars Sarah MacDonald and Nicole Symmonds use her argument in their article “Rioting as Flourishing? Reconsidering Virtue Ethics in Times of Civil Unrest.” They ask a provocative question of their readers that I want to ask of us this morning [paraphrase]: is rioting a way to move towards human flourishing? In other words, is rioting a way for oppressed people to more fully express their personhood, to potentially for positive social change?²

The crowd on Pentecost was split on this question as they gathered to witness the commotion of wind, fire, and sound coming from the people who were speaking. Some of them were amazed and confused at what they saw and

¹“Rioting as Flourishing? Reconsidering Virtue Ethics in Times of Civil Unrest.” Sarah MacDonald and Nicole Symmonds, Emory University, *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 38,1 (2018): 25-42.

²Rioting as Flourishing?, pg. 26.

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heard. Others dismissed the birth of the church, saying that the people must be drunk. But what if we turned towards the crowd, like Peter, and said, “This is the way to human flourishing. This wild scene before all of you is an act of God. And not just any act of God, but the fulfillment of a prophecy that we have been waiting to see come to fruition for centuries.” What if we said this to ourselves, right now? What if we said that the Holy Spirit was at work all across our nation right now, giving birth to something new among us?

Let me be clear--I am not condoning the destruction of businesses, homes, or government buildings committed by anyone this weekend, particularly by anyone that seeks to start a race war or using the murders of black Americans as a way to instigate more violence. I am angry that the careful, clear, and powerful work of our siblings of color was co-opted in some cities around the country by white instigators who saw the protests as opportunities to cause more destruction and discredit the movement. I am asking us to reconsider what it means to see God at work in the forces that we may see as chaotic and ungodly.

Pentecost was such a chaotic and ungodly day. It was a riotous day, not a simple feast day or a joyful birthday party. If you find yourself in the category of the amazed and perplexed this morning, then continue on that journey of curiosity. Ask yourself, “What is going on over there? What is their story? Why are they speaking that way? How can I know more?” And then get to work on learning and listening. I am asking the white people in this room to listen to our siblings of color and what they want. To defer to their leadership and step out of the way. To not center ourselves any more than we white citizens already can and do. And if we need to do some reading and learning about white privilege and white fragility, now is the time. It is not the time to clam up because we are afraid of saying the wrong thing or to shake your head because you’re overwhelmed by the violence. It is the time to check in on our friends and family of color, but not to assume what they need or how they are feeling. Do not ask your friends of color to do your emotional work for you. Instead, do your work. Look at your own story of race and culture, unpacking what being white in America means for you. My black and brown friends are tired. They are angry. They are grieving. They do not have time to teach me about my privilege. I need to go and take my curiosity with me, and do my own learning. That is my spiritual and emotional task as a Christian and a citizen. And I invite you to consider that it is each of ours.

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If you find yourself in the category of the dismissive, the afraid, the judgemental, then hear Peter’s words and reframing. He does not proclaim a word for the fainthearted this Pentecost. He proclaims a word that is full of prophesying, visions, dreams, blood, fire, smoke, solar and lunar miracles, and cries for salvation. It is not a pleasant vision. It is a powerful and transformative one. And it is one that comes with great change to the world around them. The vision from the prophet Joel, the one that Peter quotes, is about what happens to the world as it shifts into the world as it should be--the world that God invites us to participate in creating with God. Because God is already at work in our lives and in our world--but we must have the eyes to see it, the ears to hear it, the hearts to receive it.

When we see the forest burning around the country, both literal and figurative, we see this passage from Joel. When we hear the protestors lifting up their voices, we hear this passage from Joel declaring who the next prophets are. When we open our hearts to this passage, we feel Christ suffering alongside our siblings of color and fueling their righteous anger. As I close, I want to share with you that my brother is a state police officer in East Los Angeles, where riots were chaotic and violent this weekend. I see his face every time I see a picture of an officer violently treating someone, wearing riot gear, or . I see the faces of my aunts and cousins and neighbors and friends every time I see a person of color being violently treated by an officer of the law. I worry for my brother’s safety. I worry for my family’s safety and my neighbor’s safety. For my friend’s safety. All of these realities exist within me. And to choose one or the other reality is to discredit the complexity of the America that we live in right here, right now. This is us. This is America. This is Pentecost. We find ourselves standing with the confused, with the judgmental, with the prophets. What will we do? Amen.

Benediction

Go forth into the world in peace; be of good courage; hold fast that which is good; render to no one evil for evil; strengthen the fainthearted; support the weak; help the afflicted; honor everyone; love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit; and the blessing of God Almighty, the Parent, the Child, and the Holy Spirit, be amongst you and remain with you always. Amen.