

*“Being God’s Disciples, Apostles, and Prophets in the world”
Pentecost, Year A ~ May 31, 2020
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For St. Martin’s Episcopal Church
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Today is celebrated as the birthday of the church. Not of a building, but of a people gathered because there was just something about Jesus that drew them in, and they’ve been gathering ever since; they’ve been telling the story ever since. We may not be able to gather in a building, but still, we gather, as people enlivened by the Holy Spirit. I wonder if it’s because we’re still trying to make sense of it.

This is kind of like THE day for the Holy Spirit. Like if the Holy Spirit had a birthday, it would be Pentecost. The Holy Spirit is kind of hard to pin down. It can sometimes be the least understood but most often referenced person of the Trinity. The Spirit in Scripture is depicted as fire, wind, dove, wisdom. The Celts talk about the Spirit as the Wild Goose. Many people experience it as a feeling—sometimes of comfort like being wrapped in a blanket, but other times as goosebumps, things that make your hair stand up on end. There can be a very felt-sense of the Spirit for many, but yet also an impossible-to-quite-explain-or-grasp aspect of it, too. For me, it can feel like something that comes from both outside of me, but also fully within me, which is often accompanied with a sense of clarity of purpose or direction, an inspiration, a leading. Something that’s wholly me yet not me.

I remember my ordination, lying prostrate before God.
I remember what it felt like to outstretch my arms, offering my whole self to God.
I remember the fear and the rejoicing simultaneously.
I remember what it felt like as the bishop put his hands around my head,
The way he squeezed as he slowly and intentionally called the Holy Spirit to enter
me in a new way.
The touch of the hands of the other priests gathered,
On my arms and shoulders and head,
Including those of my father,
As I humbly and wholly submitted myself and my life to God.
That moment of Holy Surrender,
Of not being wholly my own,
Of not being the same person before I entered that place that day.
Something wholly unexplainable.

Bishop Gene Robinson, at a friend’s ordination, wondered aloud why we are not leerier of calling down our God through the Holy Spirit and asking for its presence when we somehow turn ordinary bread into the Body of Christ, and at baptisms and weddings and ordinations. On each of these occasions, we call down the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a wild thing, and yet we seem to have no fear of calling her down.

When the HS comes it startles you awake; it comes sometimes more like an earthquake rattling the foundation of what you thought you knew, it comes more like the winds of a hurricane tossing things about, than a gentle summer breeze. The Holy Spirit has the power to renew the face of the earth, and alter worlds, and change hearts, and sometimes where the Holy Spirit is leading you isn't the direction you had in mind. And, well, for me, it's more like often rather than sometimes. The Holy Spirit can revive old, dry bones into new life.

David Lose, a seminary professor, posits "Holy Spirit doesn't come to solve our problems but to create them." And secondly "Holy Spirit doesn't prevent failure but invites it. Holy Spirit invites us to fulfillment and victory in and through our setbacks and failures." "Finally, The Holy Spirit is as much agitator as advocate, as much provocateur as comforter."

In our story today in Acts, Peter, who had denied Jesus, is the one to stand up with great courage and proclaim the good news of God's kingdom, one in which we are all dreamers and prophets and tellers of the great story of salvation. He does this because he's provoked by the Holy Spirit into action. The Holy Spirit gives him purpose and direction and passion....enough to confront with confidence a crowd who's not wholly in agreement about this Jesus guy, and some of whom kinda just think they're drunk. This is a pivotal moment in the gospel narratives in which the reception of the Holy Spirit turns disciples into apostles. Those who are learners of the way to those who are other-focused, sent out. They are startled to wakefulness, like a bucket of ice water dumped on their heads.

You see, throughout the gospel narrative, disciples and others kept thinking Jesus came to restore Israel, but God's mission expands further than that—not simply in geographical terms, but also in language, culture, generations, races, economic and socially-constructed barriers....and, secondly, they're the ones who are going to be doing the restorative work of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is why it's understood as the inauguration of the church. They are now the ambassadors of Christ on a mission to welcome the stranger, and heal and preach and teach, and bring wholeness to all. The lens through which we view Pentecost changes our perception and understanding of it. Some look at Pentecost through the story of the Tower of Babel and see it as a reversal of that. Others through the Jewish Festival of Shavuot, the fiftieth day after the Passover which was a time in which Jews were called to acts of justice and mercy. It was a harvest festival, but they were told to not harvest everything but to leave some unharvested for those who are hungry or in need to have. It's also the remembrance of the story of Moses receiving the Torah from God.

It's also important to note that it was not a unification of languages to one common language but rather God speaking through all in their own language. Unity does not mean nor require uniformity. Differences are God-breathed and adored and loved by God. So this wasn't a bringing together of all nations and people to sameness, but rather God using God's apostles to tell of God's story, and share his healing touch to

all. God's a bit of a locavore, using the culture, language, people at hand to be revealed to those in every land.

In the early days of Christian communities, Christians were known by the peculiar way they loved one another and lived in community. They were set apart (another way to understand sanctified) by the way they lived and loved. The Mission of God was understood as the church in and of itself, rather than the later understanding of mission as something those of a church DO, or a trip taken or country visited or outreach. These things are surely all part of God's mission.

Since that first Pentecost, we walk differently in this world. Christians are little Christs. That's where the word Christian comes from. People who live according to gospel values, who live as servants and ambassadors of a different way.

During my tenure as chaplain at Project Canterbury, there was a creed we would say together that I wrote that illustrates what I mean by being a little Christ.

The Creed

To be a Christian is to be a Little Christ.

It is to be the hands, feet, eyes of Christ on earth.

It is to live Jesus' way instead of my own.

It is to be so transformed that my very identity is altered.

As Paul wrote, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me."

Let us affirm our Christian identity, mirroring the graces shown to us in God's Son in our prayer and our lives:

Presider: Because Jesus was a Healer

People: We are a community of healing.

Presider: Because Jesus was a Teacher

People: We are a community that teaches, learns and celebrates the Gift of intellect.

Presider: Jesus wept

People: So we weep and lament the horrors and injustices of this world.

Presider: Jesus loves, immeasurably, unconditionally

People: We are a community compelled to love fully, as He does.

Presider: Jesus gave boundless mercy and forgiveness.

People: We keep no record of wrongs; we forgive as we have been forgiven.

Presider: Jesus looked beyond identity, beyond society's ideas of unworthiness and saw only people in need.

People: Following Christ, as his Body in the world, we reject all the stigmas, stereotypes and judgments that separate us from our neighbors. Each and every one has a place with us.

The church is a gathering of people in the name of God. Harvest times are those times of gathering things in and then distributing them out as needed. It makes sense for Pentecost to fall at this time of year when the first harvests are coming in. I'm just getting to taste the first delicious strawberries out of my own garden!. As Psalm 104 says:

“All of them look to you to give them their food in due season. You give it to them; they gather it; you open your hand, and they are filled with good things. “
“You send forth your Spirit, and they are created; and so you renew the face of the earth.”

The Holy Spirit also reveals to us who Jesus is. Just as the person of Jesus points to who God is, the Holy Spirit points to who Christ is. As First Corinthians says “No one can say “Jesus is Lord” except through the Holy Spirit.”

It is evident in the gospel reading today the connection between understanding Jesus as Lord and God and the receiving of the Holy Spirit. “ Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord..Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you...as the Father has sent me, so I send you.” It is in receiving of the Holy Spirit that the disciples become apostles. They had been confused and perplexed about their further purpose and mission and now found clarity.

I, too, have had times where I wasn’t sure where God was leading me. And, as it often happens, I sort of end up stumbling upon where God’s leading me, seemingly by accident. It is in these times that I recall the holy surrender I have promised to God and try, often ungracefully, to get out of God’s way that I might see. And so sort of by accident, I’ve found myself to be a chaplain, not only to university students but to atheists, agnostics, and those who identify as Spiritual but not Religious. I say I stumbled upon it because it somehow didn’t occur to me that I’d been walking in the world as a chaplain all these years, and just hadn’t noticed. God saw it in me, and watched it blossom and waited for me to realize “oh, hey, I’m a chaplain. Duh.”

There’s this space between being told something and coming to believe it is true on your own. Of being both amazed and perplexed and trying to figure out what in the world does this mean. There’s often this gap between hearing something and understanding what it could mean. It is one thing to capture attention; it’s a whole other thing to make sense of it.

One of those moments was when a homeless man named Crazy Horse said to me “People want to tell their story.” I am a collector of stories. Again, mostly by accident. My super power is apparently listening and people pick that up about me and so they share their stories. Telling people they matter, listening to their story and believing them—I believe that is at the heart of my vocation as a chaplain, and each of us, as Christians. Being believed, I would posit, is a matter of salvation, of people’s journey towards wholeness.

Often people hold their stories inside, afraid that others might not believe.
We all have a story to tell, a story to share. Listening is my super power.

I can’t even count the number of times I’ve heard someone on the crisis line I serve say after me asserting that they matter that they didn’t know they needed to hear that, but they did. They had forgotten, or maybe they were never told. Some replied

more with confusion than rejoicing in wondering how I could say they mattered when I don't know them. To which I would reply that you matter simply by being a creature on this planet (a belief grounded for me in Genesis, that we are all made in the image of God). Sometimes people get confused and forget or are never told they matter, or think that mattering has to do with being productive, but that's not the story of Jesus, of God.

Purpose and vocation grounded in our understanding of our identity in Christ. To understand our purpose and vocation, we must first recall that we are made in God's image, that we live and move and have our being in God.

To whom or what is God calling you? What would a church full of prophets be like? A church who understood themselves simultaneously as disciple, prophet and apostle. Prophecy as truth-teller. One way to understand it is that we are called to live confessionally, faithfully and courageously.

We cannot understand Pentecost without first calling to mind the purpose of the incarnation is two-fold, that of God coming to us in the person of Jesus, and God's sending of us. Jesus, in today's gospel, shows up in the midst of them, in the midst of their fears, in their hiding, and proclaims God's peace. And THEN.

THEN. That sneaky little word. THEN they rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Because, honestly, sometimes it takes awhile to believe. Sometimes there's quite a pause between the proclamation of peace and blessing and joy and love and grace and the point where we get it, where we really believe it. It seems that there's a part of us that needs to be startled awake to realize oh, wait, you mean me, too? You mean I, too, am loved by God, that I, too, am worthy, that I matter, not because of something I've done, but because God has claimed us. God's there, whether we notice or respond. God's present in our very being. And the really beautiful thing is that Jesus waits for us. "Between Christ's coming and Christ's sending Jesus waits for us to recognize him, and for us to rejoice that God's good news, after all that we have done to deny it, has come to us...this paradoxical place, where Christ woos us as he waits for us is marked by revelation, recognition and rejoicing(from the book Almost Christian)"

But, to get to the place of rejoicing in Jesus' resurrection, the disciples must first encounter the wounds of the world through Christ's very wounds. And I think that's why sometimes we are not startled awake until we are moved by the wounds of this world, by oppression and injustices, and allowing ourselves to be broken open. This is as much a story about the birth of something new as it is a realization of that which had been there all along. God didn't show up for the first time at Pentecost;

God revealed God's self in another way, through the Holy Spirit. It's always this three-fold pattern of revelation, recognition, and rejoicing. This is our part in the mission of God that we all might help in the process of revelation, recognition and rejoicing to those whom we meet. That God might be revealed to us in the wounds of the world and in the joys of it. That we might see God in stranger and in the enemy.

That our own gifts might be revealed and recognized by us so that we might go into the world rejoicing and sharing God's story. And when we are caught between Jesus showing up and the "then they rejoiced in the Lord", God sends the Holy Spirit to stir things up, to help us to see, to startle us awake. In order to take part in the process of revelation, recognition and rejoicing, I believe we are called to be disciple, prophet and apostle. Disciples are those who are learning the way, and I think all of us are always in a process of learning, of coming to understand Jesus' teaching and "what they wish to be" in our little part of the world. But we don't get to stop there. We don't get to stay comfy and play the role of learners only. Discipleship alone can become inward-focused, and leave you locked in the upper room, gathered together, but not going out, as we find the disciples in the beginning of the story in the Book of Acts.

We are also called to be apostles, those who are sent, ambassadors of Christ. This balances the inward-focus of being disciples with the outward focus of being ambassadors which is very other-focused. Being one who is sent means that the story of God's love is to be shared outwardly, in acts of mercy and justice, and love. It means walking in the world differently. It means discovering our gifts and using them in God's call to each of us. Vocation and purpose are not just for clergy or for the young; each and every one of us has something to share with the world. Maybe you're a gardener, and get to know your neighbors and find out they're struggling, and that could mean sharing the bounty of your harvest. Maybe you're an artist or a crafty person and share God's love in the world by making blankets for those who don't have a warm place, or refugees who have nothing. Maybe you love cooking and know your neighbor works long hours and a fresh-cooked meal might be just the thing to keep a long day from being longer. Maybe you're a good companion and listener and can go sit with those who are lonely, listen to their stories. Maybe your heart has been broken by a recent news story and you could get your voice out there to say "This is not okay." But we do these things not to be nice but because of our rootedness in the salvation story, of the story of Jesus, of the story of this very day when the disciples were booted out the door into uncertainty, and discomfort, and sometimes persecution. And so when you do these things, do them in the name of Christ.

Finally, we are called to be prophets, prophets are those who are truth-tellers. We must be the voice for the voiceless---for whoever your other might be---to speak up when we see others hurt or in pain. To live confessionally, courageously, and faithfully. These are the gifts of the Spirit that are in each and every one of us that aid us in following God's call.