

Pentecost Year C 2019

There is just something about a city... I mean to say a big city. I remember as a child, and as a young adult travelling to New York City, and to stand on the sidewalk and just feel the human energy. One could say the same thing about Atlanta, and Austin; and even Birmingham, (maybe Mobile). In the city one's senses are quickened... maybe out of practical necessity... You really do have to pay rapt attention in a city. But more than mere practicality there is the unmistakable energy of human exchange. In a city life has an irrepressible intensity.... In a city all things seem possible.

Today is the feast of Pentecost in the church, One of the four major feasts in the catholic tradition (Christmas, Easter, All Saints, and Pentecost)... some of you will remember that back in the day we called it Whitsunday... Then, it was the last day of white hangings and vestments for our Sunday liturgy... Now we vest the church in Red, and call this Sunday Pentecost... Back then I suspect we Episcopalians, being all proper and all, preferred the name Whitsunday instead of Pentecost... because the name Pentecost seemed... well, Pentecostal. In any case, for the Christian Church it is the fiftieth day of Easter; the day we celebrate the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit among us as people of faith. The color red is the symbol of fire, harkening Luke's account of the Holy Spirit descending

upon the disciples like tongues of fire, he writes... In our window right here... there are the tongues of fire... the so-called birth of the church.

Way back in the day... I mean at the time that the gospels were written, Pentecost was a Jewish festival, the *Feast of Weeks*, which took place fifty days after the Passover. Then it was a time to celebrate the gift of the Torah, the Law given by Yahweh to the people of Israel in the Sinai desert. It had its roots in ancient fertility rites, of course, celebrating the harvest and the persistent, uncanny renewal of life... Pilgrims from the diaspora, that is, Jews living in other parts of the Mediterranean world other than Jerusalem, would make their way to the Holy City to offer a sacrifice in the Temple, and then, basically, they would stay for a week long party. I can only imagine the energy; the conversations, the music... and the food. I think it probable that the writer of Luke's gospel had one of those 'city experiences' during the feast of weeks. People from all over the eastern portion of the empire would be packed into the city, speaking their own languages, of course; language the gift of expressing the deep reality of our identity. And Luke chose his experience as an apt metaphor for the Holy Spirit, the life force that energizes the human community... For Luke, his experience of the festival would have taken place after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans, intended to be the death-knell of Jewish culture, the Temple being the

epi-center of Jewish religious, social, and political life... It was a dangerous time in Jerusalem to be sure and yet, the people came still, full of life and energy and joy... So for Luke, this Pentecost event is the culmination of Easter, the culmination of the resurrection now animating and renewing a people... as dramatic as a mighty wind, as consuming as fire... That no power or principality can break the Spirit of God's people... that joy is possible even amid oppression and violence and despair. In no small way it was a celebration of courage... courage breathed into God's people... God's very life among a people to bear them forward in a brave new world.

Luke's account of the so-called coming of the Holy Spirit happens fifty days after the resurrection. Neither Matthew nor Mark give an account of the Pentecost event. For John, the disciples receive the Holy Spirit on the day of resurrection. You remember, Jesus enters a locked room where the disciples are having a secret meeting... and he tells them just two things: Peace be with you, and "receive the Holy Spirit." And of course there are accounts of the workings of the Spirit throughout Hebrew scripture as well... The Ruach Yahweh, the scribes call it... the breath of God. This is the same Spirit that moved over the chaos of the deep in the very beginning; the same Spirit that parted the Red Sea in Sinai; The same Spirit that spoke to Joseph in dreams and visions; the same Spirit that

enabled David the first monarch of Israel to defeat the Philistine Goliath; the same Spirit that inspired the prophets to speak the truth of God.

So Luke and John have their different tales to tell as to what the Holy Spirit is up to. Some of the Holy men of Israel during the time of Roman occupation lamented that God had withdrawn God's Spirit... How else to explain the brutal occupation by a Pagan people and their false gods? But for Luke, the power of the Spirit is once again among the people in Christ Jesus; raising them up in the dignity of community, in spite of the social, economic and political circumstances. For Luke the Spirit is a testament to the irrepressible life force; that God will raise up a people, and give them life... he's seen it.

Our gospel reading for today is taken from John. So let's look at John's take on the Holy Spirit; recognizing, as I think you do, that these gospels offer different perspectives, sometimes competing perspectives on the life and ministry of Jesus. This passage is from the fifteenth chapter, six chapters before the resurrection appearance in which Jesus tells his disciples to receive the Holy Spirit... Jesus is speaking here of his impending death and he is assuring his disciples that his presence will remain with them.... That he will remain with them as the spirit of truth... but John refers to the Spirit in a unique way, unlike Luke or any other

scribe in Hebrew or New Testament literature. He refers to the Spirit as the Advocate.... Now, the Greek word is lawyer... The Spirit as Lawyer. God help us.

Some of you are familiar with the writing of Bart Ehrmann, a fine biblical scholar at the University of North Carolina. He argues that one of the reasons Christianity had staying power up and against the state religion of Rome, was because of its advocacy for the poor and the marginalized. So here in this passage we are seeing the roots of that ethos... the notion of God's presence in the world as advocate. A Lawyer's vocation is to bring about justice (in theory) So John's premise here is that God is advocate for the voiceless of our world. The other Gospel writers indeed name the mission and ministry of the Jesus movement as for the outcasts and the marginalized. But John names it explicitly as a practice. John's point is that the way God Loves the world is through passionate advocacy. That the central characteristic of the kingdom of God is justice... and that makes sense doesn't it? If Salvation is about well-being and dignity, then to advocate for justice, the fair distribution of the abundance of God's creation, is to serve the well-being and dignity of God's people. That is what we promise in our Baptismal Covenant, remember... Our vocation as the Baptized is to engage the brokenness of our world by respecting the dignity of every human being, and to strive for justice... Our vocation as Christian folk is to strive for justice as advocates, as voice

for the voiceless... and in our context... to use our privilege for the ones who suffer without privilege... This is not just a liberal, or progressive spin on the Gospel... this is the Gospel.... The Gospels all exhort us to Love our world, and brothers and sisters, the means of Love in our world is justice... Justice that flows like a mighty stream... Justice that comes like wind, and consumes like fire.

Throughout our sacred lore, throughout the annals of scripture, one thing is true about the Holy Spirit.... She changes things; she will not leave things alone... She is still creating the world... she is still about the business of completion... not that things will ever be complete... but the means is the thing... and our practice as compassionate advocates is Love, and the means of Love is justice... The coming of the kingdom of God is not described as a return to the Garden of Eden. We can't go back. It comes as a Holy City; a place of human exchange.... pulsing with the Spirit of life.... So good people go into this city whose ramparts are tired and broken... but humming with possibility.... Go as wind; go into the streets as fire. Go as Love into a brave new world still suffering the pangs of birth.... And know, brothers and sisters, that the Spirit didn't just appear once, a long time ago in the Holy city of Jerusalem. The Spirit is now, and she is among us bringing courage and perspective and peace of mind.... and her work has just begun; and all things are possible.