

Acts 2:1-21

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² 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. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. ⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." ¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³ But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." ¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. ¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹ And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. ²⁰ The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. ²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

John 20:19-23

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." (546)

God declares, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.

Happy Pentecost, everyone, the birthday of the church, when we celebrate what God declares, “Even upon once slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.”

But that’s the Holy Spirit for you: even those who’d been slaves would have access to its power of prophecy, to its power to reveal what’s true, to speak of God’s deeds of power which include, surely, the urgent insight that all flesh is beloved, that all people are fully of God and of God’s making. No matter how many times there will come insistence otherwise, and in no matter how many forms it will come, and with no matter what content (that some are ugly, that some are stupid, that some are only good for what their labor produces, that some will rise only so high and no higher), they’ll somehow know: if any of us deserves love and justice, safety and human-kindness, then all of us do. Somehow, they’ll *know* that, when so much has been invested with insisting its otherwise.

And what a mess because it’s so much easier when you know who to listen to. It’s so much easier when it’s clear who has authority—what those people look like, how they present themselves. It’s so much more convenient when it comes with some tell-tale sign—fancy robes or grey suits, or badges or bars or shiny gold stars. Not anymore, though. The Holy Spirit: everyone has access to it. It rests on everyone. It *unrests* on everyone. What a mess.

This is a familiar story, if you tend to go to church. We hear this story every year in church, and always on the fiftieth day after Easter, which is to say on Pentecost. It follows on Ascension Day, the fortieth day after Easter, which is when Jesus was seen to ascend up, out of sight, on a cloud, taken into heaven. This, according to the two men in white robes who appeared among the apostles now gathered on Mount Olivet. “This Jesus,” these two men in white robes said, “This Jesus has been taken up from you into heaven. He will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

The thing is, of course, he didn’t come back. Once he was gone, he was gone.

The church would wait, and even past the ten days’ waiting, which the apostles did in that upper room following Jesus’ ascension on the fortieth day. Waited, when they’d come down from Mount Olivet, come back into the city, locked themselves back away into that now so familiar (too familiar) upper room.

Waited.

The church would wait for Jesus' return even long into Paul's lifetime ten years later, and into the time of the gospel narratives thirty, forty years later. The church would wait even into the next century, next centuries, and even unto today when certain sorts of preachers will, from time to time, announce when it will be, and then get their followers to look up and watch out, fully sure that they're the ones Jesus is coming back to see and coming back to get.

They always look pretty foolish.

They're always good for a laugh because everyone knows that what they're waiting for is silly, absurd—except for those of us who suppose that the silliness in their waiting is because what they're waiting for already happened.

Jesus' return: it already took place, and just ten days later.

The Holy Spirit—this sudden arrival, divided tongues as of fire, a sudden rush of a violent wind, elemental stuff here, Jesus' return yet in new form, which was at least as disruptive as its first form. A man, a person: that's a discrete thing, a thing easy to track, even to contain. Sure, this was a person who healed the sick and ransacked the Temple and loved the rich man who better loved his possessions, who calmed storms and caused the unholy to flee and scared Pontius Pilate so much that he became a shuffling fool, he was still a man and as such was bound by time and space. When you're a person, you can only be in one place at one time. When you're spirit, though...

Wind and fire, now a lot less contained, this presence of the holy, this charism of justice, could be anywhere and everywhere, could show up here and touch down there. This spirit could, and apparently would, and even still does, set all sorts of tongues to declare the truth. This spirit could, and apparently would, breathe its fresh life into all sorts of breathless places.

People who'd been stifled, strangled; people who once couldn't breathe: maybe now they'd be able to breathe.

That's what the Holy Spirit is, you know: breath. *Ruah*, it would be spoken of in Hebrew, breath, wind. This would become what we call the Holy Spirit.

And it was there, before the beginning, when the earth was but a formless voice, and *ruah*—that is, a wind from God—swept over the face of the waters.

It was there, too, rushing over the surface of the Red Sea, the thing by which a path was made clear, by which the once-enslaved would pass to freedom, while the army of the slave-masters would get swamped and bogged down.

It was there amidst the valley of the dry bones where, as Ezekiel witnessed, the bones rattled themselves together, bone to its bone, and then stood, and then were filled with *ruah*—that is, the breath of life—a risen people where they'd once laid, a mass grave, life strangled and stomped out.

It is the creative power of life as spoken of in the Psalms, the sustaining power of wellness as spoken of in Proverbs, the governing power of Judges once the people had settled in the land; and nearly everything Jesus did, especially according to Luke, was as led by the Holy Spirit, though this time it was the Greek word *pneuma*. Everything he did, led by Holy Spirit, spurred by the Holy Spirit, empowered by the Holy Spirit, because he was filled with the Holy Spirit.

No surprise, then, that Luke's second book would also feature so prominently the Holy Spirit. The Acts of the Apostles, which is Luke's second book, and which concerns itself with the events that followed Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension, has as its main character the *pneuma*. If the gospel were all about Jesus, then Acts is all about the Holy Spirit—what happens when people respond to it, are filled with it, are encouraged and strengthened and convicted by it.

I'll tell you, it made for a real mess. For starters, the world was a tinderbox then. Rome was cracking down. The Jews were running scared. This new witness of a crucified one, whom those in power had meant to make just go away and whom yet was (apparently) back—it was the last thing this already-endangered group needed among their ranks. Apostles ended up in prison. They ended up shipwrecked on distant shores, stoned to death close to home, crucified. But they just wouldn't stop, not even once the book was finished, not even once the century turned from first to second. North African Christian theologian Tertullian of Carthage put it well in the late second century: "The more you mow us down, the more we grow."

Wouldn't it be nice to find out, though, if there'd have been growth were the mowing down to have stopped?

I'd welcome knowing that.

There is another aspect of the Holy Spirit, for what it's worth, that we're to remember on Pentecost Sunday—something quiet, something intimate as your own breath, something powerful but in its power to calm, its power to pacify. The night when Jesus appeared among the apostles, was the night following his rising on Resurrection morning. They were locked away for fear that the violence of two days earlier wasn't yet quelled, that the police were yet being dispatched to

round up more people, that the spectacular death of Jesus, made to suffocate on a cross, wouldn't satisfy the power structure or those most empowered by that power structure, that they'd be looking for others to string up.

The Gospel of John insists upon these people as “the Jews,” but what's meant in that is people who had the power of both religion and the state, to speak in modern terms—and they might have been looking for more people to turn over, these of such power and force; they might have been yet poised to purge the city, not only of Jesus, but now also the followers of Jesus, maybe now more than ever, since there was this rumor that Jesus' tomb was empty, which means that one crucifixion didn't (apparently) hold. It had killed him, but apparently hadn't. It had stopped him, but it didn't. So maybe now there would have to more—maybe Peter and John should/could be arrested, maybe James and Andrew could/should be hung on a cross, maybe Philip and Thomas, maybe all of them. Bartholomew and Matthew. James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. Maybe the police should, and indeed would, come and get them all.

For this, they were locked away in fear.

For this, then, Jesus' greeting might have been wildly off the mark. “Peace be with you,” he said, the first words of the resurrected Christ, the first words of the one who'd been unjustly murdered, most painfully, most shamefully. When he might have come in vengeance, he yet came in peace. When he might have marshalled his apostles as soldiers, he yet empowered them as people, just people, “Peace be with you,” and breathing on them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

The church is to be a people filled with the Holy Spirit. The church is to be a people who believe in the Holy Spirit, who can look at the mess of the world and trust that Spirit is at work in all the mess—for it would be easier if we went the way of the authoritarian, in which it's obvious to whom we should listen and who is in charge. But God apparently has something else in mind, at least for these late days, long into when the spirit has blown and burned and poured forth. Even those once slaves will know the truth, might perhaps know it best of all. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called it the view from below, the perspective of the oppressed which can see the machinations of power, its puppetry and pageantry, its pretense and rot.

I spent most of the end of the week watching the news from Minneapolis, and then from Louisville, and New York, and Atlanta, and Philadelphia—and maybe you did too. It's frightening to imagine being caught up in such chaos, frightening to imagine being amidst a dynamic where

discerning the will of the Spirit of justice and truth is even more bewildering a process than usual. The rage I imagine I would feel if I were Black in America, the effort it would take not to go berserk in the classic sense of the word—wildly ferocious, fiercely doing battle: I really don't know how that's done day to day, to say nothing of done on the sorts of days we've had lately.

I don't know.

I can only trust.

I can only trust that the hot burn of protest, and even the live fires of riot, when not stoked by opportunists who are just keen on chaos, will speak what the voiceless need to have spoken, and that from the trash and rubble, and even the ash and ember, there might grow up a will and way for true justice. I can only trust that even dreadful unrest can be a sign of the Holy Spirit. (Of course, I must also pray that, were dreadful unrest to come to me to act amidst, I would do so courageously for righteousness' sake.) Really, I can only trust in that essential yearning of spirit which builds up and that elemental burning of spirit which tears down, though nearly never settles down, and certainly never just settles.

What a mess we're in.

The Holy Spirit is with us.

We must believe this. We're the church. Belief, trust, in the Holy Spirit is elemental to our being.

Thanks be to God.