



A Prayer to be Burned Up and Blown Away by the Holy Spirit

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin Field

The Feast of Pentecost~May 20, 2018

Ezekiel 37:1-14

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord." So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act," says the Lord.

Psalm 104:25-35, 37b

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| 25 O Holy One, how manifold are your works! *
in wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures. | 30 You hide your face, and they are terrified; *
you take away their breath,
and they die and return to their dust. |
| 26 Yonder is the great and wide sea
with its living things too many to number, *
creatures both small and great. | 31 You send forth your Spirit, and they are created; *
and so you renew the face of the earth. |
| 27 There move the ships,
and there is that Leviathan, *
which you have made for the sport of it. | 32 May the glory of God endure for ever; *
may the Holy One rejoice in all creation. |
| 28 All of them look to you *
to give them their food in due season. | 33 God looks at the earth and it trembles; *
God touches the mountains and they smoke. |
| 29 You give it to them; they gather it; *
you open your hand,
and they are filled with good things. | 34 I will sing to God as long as I live; *
I will praise my God while I have my being. |
| | 35 May these words of mine find favor; *
I will rejoice in the Holy One. Alleluia! |

Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one

heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." 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. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: '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. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'"

John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

Jesus said to his disciples, "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning. I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned. 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. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

The story of Pentecost is one of the great miracle stories in the Bible. As we heard a few minutes ago, the disciples are gathered together, waiting in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit to show up—something Jesus had assured them would happen but, in typical fashion, had not given details. No ETA. So they were hanging out and waiting. And then, something that was not in their plans, but was in God's happened—a bunch of outsiders—devout Jews from all over the known world, gathered in the city to celebrate Pentecost—a celebration of the spring barley harvest and the giving of the Law to Moses, this bunch crashes the disciples' party—suddenly hearing and understanding the disciples in their own languages. They are stunned—all around. The devout Jews are stunned that this ragtag group of uneducated people, people who have not traveled the world, have not studied languages, can understand and speak them as if they each had graduate degrees in ancient languages. Galilean is biblical shorthand for hick—so when the bewildered crowd asks, “are not all these who are speaking Galileans?”, they are in fact asking how it is possible that this uneducated, unsophisticated bunch of country bumpkins can speak their language and can understand them. And the disciples share this incredulity because, in an instant, in a blast of wind and flaring forth of flames, the impossible has become possible. A pure act of the Spirit that occurs because of people's openness to the transformative power of divine love.

And it seems that this power of divine love, seen clearly in Jesus, and again in the Spirit desires us each to know ourselves in our individuality as beloved children of God, and to see every other blessed person as the same-as family, as one. Desires us to be, in Christ, a new humanity-rooted in and fed by Love. Jesus spends much of his time in the latter part of John's Gospel talking about Oneness. But here in the Pentecost story we have the Spirit acting decisively to make it so. Literally breaking through barriers that divide us and creating common ground. Creating communion, from seemingly insurmountable differences.

And boy, if ever there was a moment we needed Pentecost, needed this particular communion creating work of the Spirit, it is now. Division, hatred, rancor, pain, and injustice haunt our nation. Our political discourse is poisonous. We are debating all sorts of issues, like immigration. And while we “debate”, families are being separated—parents rounded up and dragged away from children and grandparents, and the government is setting up detention centers in which children will be separated from their parents and held. We argue about guns, even as our children are being slaughtered in their schools and each year the number of people killed by gun violence increases. White and black communities disagree with each other and argue over our legal system and system of policing, even as overt racism and bigotry are on the rise and people of color are killed or arrested in wildly disproportionate numbers. And tensions are high over the presence of Islamic communities in America.

While you might think that Christians would at least agree on basic issues of human dignity, on Jesus' call to serve the last and the least, we do not. In fact, some of the worst divisions are within and among Christian churches. We are infected with tribalism, ignoring or demonizing those who are different from us. As Dr. Keri Day, whose thoughts inspired this sermon, writes, “Consider how Mexican immigrants are often depicted by the current administration, an administration that is supported by a record number of white churches. These immigrants are represented as criminal, lazy, and dangerous, in need of deportation to save the body politic”. The recent disgraceful spectacle of the president of the United States describing some who seek refuge in the US as animals, as if anyone is not made in the image of God, is but one ugly example. “White ministers often suggest from pulpits that African Americans in urban areas are responsible for whatever injustices befall them because of their own sins, both personal and social. Such tribal perspectives fuel a culture of doubt and fear. And people feel a sense of helplessness. Such churches tend to embody Babel rather than Pentecost. We need a miracle.” We desperately need the miracle that is Pentecost. The miracle that creates, through the love and work of the Spirit, through that love, creates bonds of community. The miracle of all of us being open to the Spirit's shocking, disturbing, and surprising work which empowers us to reach across and dissolve boundaries; forging community out of disunity, experiencing radical communions along the way.

American Pentecostalism, a group of churches who take their name from this feast of the Holy Spirit, sprang out of an event known as the Azusa Street Revival. It first took place on April 9, 1906 in LA and was led by a black preacher named William Seymour, and it led to a series of meetings that went through 1915 and that spawned a movement. At the time, Azusa Street was criticized by the white establishment for being unorthodox and outrageous. In part because of the style and theology of worship, but also because it was threatening. It was a division busting community, creating communion across differences-black and white together. Black men laying hands on and praying over white women to receive the gifts of the Spirit and white men laying hands on and praying over black women to receive the gifts of the Spirit. It was a community that, without fanfare, overturned the social order of the day, embraced the humanity of all, and created a holy, insurgent communion among and between people. The vision of black people leading white people into communion with each other and with the

Spirit was as shocking to white America as the spectacle of Galilean hicks speaking many languages was to the devout Jews gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost. Impossible. Yet somehow possible. Signs of the Holy Spirit working to reconcile all and to create communities of love and justice.

And despite how helpless we may feel in the midst of the barrage of hateful noise that comes our way today, there are signs of this same Spirit's ongoing work of transformative love. Communities of people determined to break down barriers, determined to be places where the Baptismal vow to respect the dignity of all people and to seek justice for all are alive and on the move. Organizations working to promote love and justice; like POWER right here in Philadelphia, like the Rev. William Barber's National Call for Moral Revival, and the Reclaiming Jesus movement, which our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has signed onto, whose statement of belief includes: each human being is made in God's likeness, we are one body, how we treat the hungry/thirsty/sick/naked/refugee/prisoner is how we treat Christ, truth is morally central to our personal and public lives, and that Christ's way of leadership was servanthood not domination. These organizations and movements seek to shake us up, disorient us and point us in a new direction- the direction of communion, of justice, of love.

The events of Pentecost, the miracle of Pentecost, invites each of us to dwell with and answer the question for ourselves; will we be open to, vulnerable to, holy disorientation—holy confusion and redirection, just as the disciples were, just as the folks at Azusa were, in order to announce a new humanity? Will we allow our voices to speak a language of good news that can be heard by all people, especially those who are as vulnerable as the Jews of Jesus' day were under the Roman Empire and as countless people are under American empire today? Will we be open to this joy of Pentecost, the impossible gift of community now made possible through the work of the Spirit? My prayer for each of us, for Charles and Louisa who are about to be baptized, is that the wind of the Holy Spirit blows through our lives and turns us around, that the fire of the Holy Spirit burns within us and drives us to be voices for justice, and that the love of the Holy Spirit creates and strengthens the bonds of communion between us and all of God's beloved people.