



## No Going Back

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field  
The Feast of Pentecost ~ May 31, 2020*

### Numbers 11:24-30

So Moses went and told the people what God had said. He gathered seventy elders and had them surround the Tent. YHWH came down in a cloud and spoke to Moses. Taking some of the Spirit that was in Moses, God bestowed it on the seventy elders whom Moses had gathered there; and as the Spirit came to rest on them, they were seized with prophesying, and did not stop.\* Now two other elders, one named Eldad and the other Medad, were not in the gathering but had stayed behind in the camp. They had been summoned to the tent, but had not gone; yet the Spirit came to rest on them also, and they prophesied in the camp. When a youth came running to tell Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp,” Joshua, ben-Nun, who from youth had been Moses’ aide, cried, “Moses, stop them!” But Moses answered, “Are you jealous for my sake? If only all of God’s people were prophets! If only YHWH would bestow the Spirit on them all!” Then Moses returned to the camp with the elders.

### Psalm 104:25-35, 37

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| 25 O Holy One, how manifold are your works; *<br>in wisdom you have made them all;<br>the earth is full of your creatures. | 31 You send forth your Spirit, and they are created; *<br>and so you renew the face of the earth. |
| 26 Yonder is the great and wide sea<br>with its living things too many to number, *<br>creatures both small and great.     | 32 May the glory of God endure for ever; *<br>may the Holy One rejoice in all creation.           |
| 27 There move the ships, and there is that Leviathan, *<br>which you have made for the sport of it.                        | 33 God looks at the earth and it trembles; *<br>God touches the mountains and they smoke.         |
| 28 All of them look to you *<br>to give them their food in due season.   | 34 I will sing to God as long as I live; *<br>I will praise my God while I have my being.         |
| 29 You give it to them; they gather it; *<br>you open your hand, and they are filled with good things.                     | 35 May these words of mine find favor; *<br>I will rejoice in the Holy One.                       |
| 30 You hide your face, and they are terrified; *<br>you take away their breath,<br>and they die and return to their dust.  | 37 Bless the Holy One, O my soul. *<br>Alleluia!  |

### Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they all met in one room. Suddenly they heard what sounded like a violent, rushing wind from heaven; the noise filled the entire house in which they were sitting. Something appeared to them that seemed like tongues of fire; these separated and came to rest on the head of each one. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as she enabled them. Now there were devout people living in Jerusalem from every nation under heaven, and at this sound they all assembled. But they were bewildered to hear their native languages being spoken. They were amazed and astonished: “Surely all of these people speaking are Galileans! How does it happen that each of us hears these words in our native tongue? We are Parthians, Medes and Elamites, people from Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya around Cyrene, as well as visitors from Rome— all Jews, or converts to Judaism— Cretans and Arabs, too; we hear them preaching, each in our own language, about the marvels of God!” All were amazed and disturbed. They asked each other, “What does this mean?” But others said mockingly, “They’ve drunk too much new wine.” Then Peter stood up with the Eleven and addressed the crowd: “Women and men of Judea, and all you who live in Jerusalem! Listen to what I have to say! These people are not drunk as you think—it’s only nine o’clock in the morning! No, it’s what Joel the prophet spoke of: ‘In the days to come—it is our God who speaks—I will pour out my Spirit on all humankind. Your daughters and sons will prophesy, your young people will see visions, and your elders will dream dreams. Even on the most insignificant of my people, both women and men, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. And I will display wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below: blood, fire and billowing smoke. The sun will be turned into darkness and the moon will become blood before the coming of the great and sublime day of our God. And all who call upon the name of our God will be saved.’

**John 20:19-23**

In the evening of that same day, the first day of the week, the doors were locked in the room where the disciples were, for fear of the Temple authorities. Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Having said this, the savior showed them the marks of crucifixion. The disciples were filled with joy when they saw Jesus, who said to them again, "Peace be with you. As Abba God sent me, so I'm sending you." After saying this, Jesus breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven. If you retain anyone's sins, they are retained."

It has been about 10 weeks now. 10 weeks of waiting. Waiting to see how bad things get. Waiting to see who and what we will lose next. Waiting to see if our national leaders will finally do the right thing. Waiting sometimes patiently, sometimes anxiously, sometimes sadly. Waiting to see when, when we can just get back to normal.

Today is the Feast of Pentecost. The day when, as we read, the Holy Spirit showed up to a small band of Jesus' followers. They were waiting, just as he had instructed, in a room in Jerusalem. Exactly what they were waiting for they did not know. Exactly when it would show up, they did not know. Perhaps some of them were secretly hoping that whatever it was, it would make sure they could get their lives back to normal.

Then She made her entrance. With fire. And wind. And, I imagine, the loud honking of a goose. I know the church has usually envisioned the Holy Spirit as a gentle dove—murmuring and cooing. And it is true there are times that the Spirit is perfect consolation, but her first appearance was not as a gentle dove but a wild goose that flies in from nowhere, honks loudly and obnoxiously, makes a mess on your lawn, and then flies off again. This was no gentle breeze, it was a whirlwind that stood their hair on end and knocked the breath out of their lungs. This was no marshmallow toasting camp fire. This was an inferno that danced on their heads—**FLAMES ON THEIR HEADS**, people. They left the room with singed eyebrows and smoking hair. Lives disrupted. Plans on hold. And when they left that room, she went with them. Sending them out into the world to do things they had never imagined doing and were sure they did not have the courage to do.

Those present in that room were changed. There was no going back—there was no return to normal—only going forward into a new and different future than the one they had imagined.

I can't help but wonder if the Spirit is working up to a hurricane right about now. If she is honking to get our attention, trying to lead us in a different direction. I cannot help but believe that, now, with each of us locked by the pandemic in a sort of upper room, she is on the move again—swirling through our homes, our heads, our hearts.

Because what we see around us, perhaps really see for the first time, is a world desperately in need of change. A world of suffering, asking the age old theological question; why does suffering exist? Some suffering seems to just be built into creation—part and parcel of the innate freedom of the universe. We cannot and do not understand the why of this suffering. But there is a whole lot of suffering that is the result of human action or inaction. Why COVID 19 appeared on the planet we do not know and likely never will. That it jumped species and began wreaking havoc among humans can be linked to the wild imbalance we have created between humanity and the rest of God's beloved creation. The ways we have behaved as if every other living thing exists just to feed us, amuse us, or serve us. That COVID 19 is disproportionately infecting and killing poor people, black and brown people is the direct result of the systems we have created that keep poor people in poverty, that trap black and brown people in a network of disadvantage—trap too many of them in neighborhoods next to chemical plants, incinerators, trash dumps. Meaning they suffer from the very diseases that make them more susceptible to COVID 19 because of where they live, where our system of empire has deemed they live.

God did not create this suffering. We did. Through years of ignoring God's dream for the world—the dream of a world of justice, where love and compassion reign. We have instead created a world that is fractured, broken. For too too long we have been in the business of de-creating what God has created. We have grieved God's heart. And it is not like we could not have known, did not know what God desired. “I have told you, O Mortal, what is good. And what does the Holy One require of you? Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God.” “Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor as yourself.” “Love one another as I have loved you.” God has made crystal clear what God desires, how we are to live, what we are to do. And we have stuffed our fingers in our ears and covered our eyes.

God did not cause this—God does not will suffering for any of God's beloved. But God leaves us to the consequences of our choices. God walks with us through the mess we make, but God will not whisk us out of it.

And we now see clearly the truth that we cannot go on as we have done. All of the fault lines in our relationships, our common life, have been laid open by this pandemic. Environmental destruction, racism, classism, sexism. It is clear now that the fear of scarcity, of each other, the fears that rule our lives have been in control—with the one we need to live, holy fear, not in the conversation.

But, come on, we say, all we want to go back to normal. For those of us with privilege—white, wealthy, normal looks like going for a jog, going out to restaurants, getting out hair cut, going to farmer's markets, traveling freely, watching our stock portfolio recover, possibly having that elective surgery,

All of which, while understandable, are forms of stuffing our fingers in our ears and covering our eyes. Because a return to that normal means continuing our corrupt relationship with the earth. It means an ever rapid acceleration of heating the planet and all that causes—extinction of species, climate refugees, hunger, drought. It means the ongoing decimation of Mother Earth.

We see, or should see, that a return to normal means going back to being comfortable with vast income inequality. Millions of Americans live in poverty or deep poverty, millions are hungry, and yet addressing poverty has not been part of our national agenda, not been discussed in national political campaigns for a long time. Huge swaths of the population, unseen, are simply left out of the economy. If you listen to talk of the economy, the main metric used is the health of the stock market—and the talking heads get super excited when the Dow goes up. As do those of us with 401Ks and stocks. But almost half of the country does not have money in the stock market. Almost half has no stake in the central pillar of our economy. Almost half of God's beloved in this country are simply not in the equation.

Despite the fact that we have suddenly labeled them as essential, restaurant workers working long hours and farm workers picking fruits and vegetables in brutal conditions are not paid close to a living wage. Many of them work multiple jobs to survive. And in a nation infected with economic inequality, a nation where despite our aspirational and inspirational ideals, normal means 44 million Americans, and rising, do not have health insurance. And 38 million do not have adequate health insurance. Normal means tying health care to whether or not someone has a job, and not just any job, but one of the decreasing number that offer that “benefit.”

In a nation infected with racism a return to normal means, as Ahmaud Arbery attests, that a black man simply going for a jog can get shot to death. Trayvon Martin tells us that a black teenager going to the convenience store for some skittles is suspicious and can get shot to death. Tamir Rice tells us that a 12 year old black boy can get shot for playing with a toy gun in a playground. Breonna Taylor tells us that a black woman can get shot to death just sitting in her living room. Christopher Cooper can tell us how a black man birdwatching in Central Park can be falsely accused of aggression. A return to normal means black and brown parents must continue to teach their children that the world will treat them unfairly, that they will have to work harder for everything. And they must continue teaching their children that as Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, and George Floyd attest, being black means that you are not treated equally in the eyes of the law and that you may end up being murdered on the sidewalk or in the street for the crime of being black.

I am guessing that hearing this litany makes you, like it makes me, angry. Helpless. Makes us want God to show up and fix this. If that applies to you then you are engaging in that age old prayer of lament—that cry to God from the bottom of a pit. And perhaps we, especially those of us with privilege, need to sit with this cry of lament for a while. Need to recognize the mess we have created, the mess we are in and acknowledge that we need help. Perhaps this is exactly where we need to be in this moment.

And if we sit with it long enough, we might just hear a distant honk carried in on a breeze we begin to feel on our faces. Because, now, right now, the Holy Spirit is offering us the chance to turn and go in a new direction. As Arandathi Roy writes, “historically pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.”

The good news is that we do not walk into the future alone. We walk with each other and we are pushed along by the wind of the Spirit. None of us can fix the ills of the world we have created, but we can each do something. Raise our voices in protest. Vote. Pressure our elected leaders to address poverty, income inequality. We can choose to spend our money in places that treat their employees with respect and dignity, and pay them a living wage. We can choose to tread more lightly on this earth. We white people can look deep into our own hearts and lives and work to dismantle the systems that privilege us. We can take a course in community organizing and organize our family, friends, and neighbors. Speak up and speak out when someone you know or love makes a racist comment or reveals a racist attitude—we all know or possibly are an Amy Cooper.

Because, if we let the compassion and justice of God, the winds of the Spirit, direct us, there will be no return to normal. There is no going back. Our lives have been, thanks be to God, disrupted, changed, and now there is only going out into the world to do things we did not imagine we could do, into a different future than the one we had thought, finding courage we did not know we had, accompanied by the wind, the fire, by the fiercely wild presence of the Holy Spirit.