

Pastor Frank Espegren

Sermon for Pentecost Sunday – May 23, 2021

Acts 2:1-21 – “Pyre to Pyre”

Grace and peace to you this day from God our Loving Parent & from the one who sears new life into our very souls, Jesus Christ, our Savior & Lord. Amen. Before today's lesson from Acts we shorthand reference as Pentecost, before the rush of a violent wind and the spread of tongues of fire, before the very first disciples witness God's power that has people of many languages and places speaking and understanding each other (a sort of unity of communication not experienced since the Tower of Babel & totally missing in our polarized day, in which we seem incapable of listening and speaking civilly to one another), before the wondrous revelation of the Holy Spirit and what we call the birthday of the church, Jesus has told his first disciples to do something we find very hard to do – Jesus tells them in the first chapter of Acts before the big action here in chapter 2, to wait. **“Wait in Jerusalem, wait there for the promise of the Father.” Pentecost is many things, but first, it is the fulfillment of the promise that the disciples will be given what they need in a promised new life. But in order to get there, first they must wait. And waiting is one of the things we as human beings, especially in our modern culture, are not very good at.**

I just finished a “reading week” up at Sea Ranch. It was a quiet, reflective & needed time alone to ponder the trajectory of our ministry together here at St. John’s (and my leadership role) as we obviously, albeit slowly, make our way to a long awaited, new day in, and I pray, beyond, the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the books I brought, written by Pastor, and Larger Church Consultant, Susan Beaumont, commanded my attention. The title reveals its relevance - *How To Lead When You Don’t Know Where You’re Going – Leading in a Liminal Season*. Of course, the pandemic has been for the church (and many other societal configurations) a changing point.

But even before the pandemic, anyone paying any attention at all could see that the church, especially in the broad geographical category we call the “West,” was in flux.

Theologian Phyllis Tickle has for some time argued that the Christian movement is in the midst of one of its significant re-makes, something that she asserts happens every 500 years or so, and the last time being a time and place near and dear to our hearts as Lutherans; that is, the Protestant Reformation, which of course occurred with Martin Luther at its center & apex.

Of course, the pandemic has only accelerated all of that, and we here at St. John’s, as an historic (and sometimes, when we are at our very best)

groundbreaking Christian institution here in Sacramento should want to have a say in what the Church is becoming, in the direction of what a Christian life of faith for an individual and community could look like in this new age. Will we take the leap of faith, and become a vanguard in the coming new expression of Christianity. My guess is that it will look both old and new, and I am excited to be a part of it. I hope you are too.

But before there can be any true insight into the next, we must become comfortable waiting in the unknown, waiting for God, waiting for Pentecost!

It came like wind, and it came like fire, as God so often does in our lives, especially in liminal, transitional, uncertain moments. Fire that both smolders, and can strike fast - a powerful force, both destructive and refining. Will we wait if what we wait for might just consume and transform us?

I know, fire is a strong and sometimes terrifying image. I think of the pyres lighting the skies in India as Covid-19 rushed like a wave through their cities. But before you freak out about it, may I present a second imaginative way to understand the Holy Spirit – something to balance out the frightening image of fire – I am talking about the form of a dove.

Of course that comes from the powerful image of the Spirit descending on Jesus in the form of a dove at his baptism. And then also in Genesis, at the very front of the Bible, the great story of Noah and the Flood – there we find the dove as a symbol that marks the end of traumatic time, a coming into something new after great turmoil, as the dove in Noah's ark symbolizes, flying out from the bobbing ark and bringing back an olive branch – a symbol of hope and peace, that there will, once again, be solid ground on which to stand. May these origami doves that grace our worship today be a sign that no matter how hot it gets during the changes afoot in the church and our lives in liminal times, God's promise is / will be firm footing for you, when everything else feels like it is burning up.

Wait, because what you thought you knew is ending, wait because something completely new is also waiting with you to be born. Indeed, we are living through stressful and challenging times. But Oh, how God loves to work through such times. Think of what Martin Luther started when he said, "Here I stand," into the maws of the Holy Roman Empire, "Here I stand." Think about those early disciples to whom Jesus returned in peace and love after they had betrayed and denied him; scattered and hidden.

In fact, for the full impact of Pentecost in the book of Acts to take hold, we must remember all of what the disciples experienced as conveyed in the Gospel of Luke (Volume 1 of the Luke/Acts series). We must remember that the disciples had already lived and died to old and new many times before. Old lives abandoned – fishing nets left on the ground at the feet of a bewildered father. New power witnessed and extended – impossible illnesses healed, storms stilled, lost causes saved, traditions recast, the very ending they thought would be Jesus' reign (and theirs also by association) put to death, on a cross, which, much to their surprise, turned out to be the ultimate rising from dying.

You can track this pattern in our lives too – a spouse or child or parent or friend dies, illness descends, employment terminates, security evaporates. We know what it feels like to wave goodbye, like the disciples watching the Risen Christ ascend to heaven. And we wonder can we take one more goodbye in our lives? Will we survive one more death? If one more person, even Jesus, asks me to wait, I'm not sure I will be able to take it.

Wait, Jesus says, wait there for the promise - out of death, life beyond all hope and measure. If I might be so bold as to add prefaces to one of Jesus' best known sayings: Through innumerable twists and turns, "I am the Way." Through seemingly impossible, ironic reversals, "I am

the truth.” Though death after death, both big and small, “I am the Life.”

What seems at first terrifying in life, the “blood and fire and smoky mist” of the prophet Joel, turns out to be a brand new opportunity for God to touch down in our lives, to rush into us like a powerful wind. But saying yes to something is always a death to something else. Over and over again, Jesus pressed this with the disciples, and they must have wondered, what is Jesus doing, why is he stirring the pot, where is he going, how can we possibly follow him there – over and over they must have been tempted to bail. Wait for the promise Jesus says – in dying to your old self, I will raise you up. The sign of the cross made over us becomes the new imprinter in our lives. We become new, you see, from the inside out.

One of my favorite of all time poets, T.S. Eliot addressed this very thing in the last of his “Four Quartets,” a poem entitled “Little Gidding” and published in 1943, as the horror of World War II raged on. **Eliot captures in poetry what it means to both wait and be consumed (note our central images today of both dove and fire)!!**

The dove descending breaks the air/with flame of incandescent terror/Of which the tongues declare/The one discharge from sin and

*error./The only hope, or else despair/Lies in the choice of pyre or
pyre/To be redeemed from fire by fire.*

*What we call the beginning is often the end/And to make an end is to
make a beginning/The end is where we start from.*

It begins and ends with a promise, with waiting, and receiving the new – life, love, struggle, joy, even death - the promise that God is with us, upon us, around us, and, yes, in us. The promise of Pentecost is that as we wait, God's grace lands searingly and lovingly upon us. Truly, we are "redeemed from fire by fire." Wait for it. Amen.