

Becoming God's Glitter

Happy Pentecost! Today, we celebrate the birth of the Christian church and the arrival of the Holy Spirit. And oh, what an entrance she makes! Rushing winds, tongues of flame, multilingual testimonies, and a formerly disgraced disciple suddenly emboldened to inspire the masses, silence the skeptics, and give joyful voice to God's power in our world. *Wow*.

Jesus told the disciples to expect the Holy Spirit, but they can't have imagined how spectacular her arrival would be. It's not as though the Spirit was unknown to them. As devout Jews, the disciples would have been familiar with the Spirit as the divine presence that hovered over the waters at the dawn of creation, or the breath of God that resuscitated the dry bones in Ezekiel's vision, the same Spirit that brings to life all of God's creatures in this morning's psalm. But they probably didn't equate that disembodied Spirit with the Advocate whom Jesus promised to send, "the Spirit of truth that comes from the Father [to] prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment." The disciples probably thought Jesus would send them someone much like himself, a supernatural being in a human body. That person would serve as a heavenly prosecutor, judging the people and condemning the Adversary. Perhaps that's why Peter stepped forward last week to drive the selection of Matthias to replace Judas. Maybe Peter figured the new guy would want the same number of disciples that Jesus had, so they'd better be fully staffed when he arrived. I doubt that Peter or any of the other disciples anticipated the fireworks that accompanied the Holy Spirit as she came barreling into Jerusalem.

The Acts of the Apostles is the second book of the Bible written by our patron, Saint Luke. If his Gospel is the story of how Jesus came to save a fallen humanity, Acts is the story of how the Holy Spirit invited all of humankind to share in that salvation. As Bible scholar William W. Willimon observes, Luke affirms that salvation comes because "in Jesus the Christ there is a

[saving] power loose in the world.” Luke understands that salvation isn’t something we can accomplish on our own; it’s a gift of divine grace. As Willimon explains, Luke’s original phrasing, which gets lost in our translation, isn’t “save yourselves” so much as it is “let yourself be saved” by being open to the Spirit’s power. No one embodies that openness better than Peter who, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, makes an abrupt leap from the repentant sinner who couldn’t quite forgive himself to the lion of God we see in this passage. Jesus had already given the former Simon a new name, calling Peter the rock on which his church would be built. But that name may have sat uneasily on Peter’s shoulders until Pentecost morning, when the Spirit gave him the strength and courage he would need to live into his God-given destiny.

Our readings this morning are exceptionally rich, offering enough material for hundreds of sermons. Three things stuck out for me while preparing this one, though, so let’s focus on those. First, humanity cannot put our God in a box, and it’s foolish if not blasphemous to try. The Holy Spirit personifies the wildness of the God who created the monstrous Leviathan for the sport of it and who uses hurricanes, lava flows, earthquakes, and tsunamis to shape the earth the way a sculptor might use a one-inch chisel. The Spirit blows wherever she wills, and nobody can tell her what to do or whom to be. In my own experience, when the Spirit shows up in my life, it’s not so much to offer a gentle nudge as to give me a good, strong shake that breaks my grip on anything to which I’ve clung too tightly. Loving the Spirit requires us to cultivate a lighter touch, a fondness for uncertainty, and a willingness to be swept along on the occasional wild, wonderful ride to destinations we could never have discovered by ourselves.

Second, words matter because they’re among the tools the Spirit uses to bring us to salvation. Clergy often focus on the disciples, and especially on Peter’s sermon, when preaching on this passage from Acts. Because the Holy Spirit gave the disciples the power to speak in every

language, these preachers proclaim that faithful Christians are called to testify. They urge us to bear witness, spreading the good news of the Gospel far and wide to anyone who doesn't know Jesus or hasn't yet accepted salvation. They're right that we should share our faith with others, but I think there's more to the story.

The Holy Spirit gave the disciples the power to testify in every language; she also took away any excuse the crowd might have had to ignore them. No one could claim they didn't understand what was being said. That presented the onlookers with a choice. They could listen and be transformed, like Peter, by the Spirit's saving power. Or they could play the skeptic, close their ears and hearts, and pretend that the miracle happening right in front of them was nothing more than the drunken antics of a handful of Galilean peasants. The Spirit presents us with a similar choice today. Our free will, another priceless gift from God, allows us to reject the Holy Spirit's saving grace. We can refuse to listen to the Spirit's promptings even when she's all but shouting in our ears, but we do so at our peril. As Jesus said, the Holy Spirit is the spirit of truth. If we choose to ignore her, we're falling in with the lying, self-proclaimed ruler of this world who hates us with a passion and offers us nothing of genuine value. The truth isn't always pretty, and it hurts sometimes. It can force us to make hard choices. But truth is always, *always* better than even the most enchanting lies. The truth can be trusted. The truth sets us free. And once we've dealt with the painful parts, the truth of the Holy Spirit fortifies us to go out into the world as beloved children of God, saved by grace and free to share the good news of divine love with everyone who needs or wants a reason to rejoice.

That leads to my third point. Church authorities who crave control over their flocks sometimes scold, threaten, or bully. "Listen to me and do as I say," they bellow, "or face damnation. Our God is angry and jealous, and he'll send anyone who fails to confess and cower

into eternal torment.” *Nonsense*. If God were half that dark and dangerous, the Holy Spirit would have goosestepped into Jerusalem and confronted the disciples dressed all in black and carrying a whip. Peter, the denying disciple, would have been lucky to escape with his life. Yes, God wants us to obey his commandments. We’re supposed to love God with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves, but here’s the thing. God is love, not vengeance, and our loving God wants to play with us, not punish. Close your eyes for a moment and imagine what the Holy Spirit said when she came soaring into Jerusalem. I’d bet it was something like, “Wheeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!”

In her sermon “Great Affection,” the Reverend Danée Ashley reports that, in the 19th century, faithful Southerners described their relationship with Jesus not as being “born again,” but by saying, “I was seized by the power of a great affection.” She quotes author Brennan Manning thus: “It was a profoundly moving way to indicate both the initiative of the almighty God and the explosion within the human heart when Jesus becomes Lord.” When the Holy Spirit seizes us with great affection, inspiring us to act in Jesus’s name, Ashley writes, “We are to be flung out across our communities, the nation, and the world with the release of the Holy Spirit, like God’s glitter—mingling and sparkling amongst ordinary life to show that God’s love is not so ordinary, but something radical and life-changing. We are to be those trick candles on a birthday cake that, when the world thinks it has blown us out, we come back to shine the light of Christ anew.” If we let her, the Holy Spirit transforms us into glittering sparks so we can help her set the world ablaze with God’s saving love. Our faith was never intended to be gloomy, dark, or dull. As God’s beloved children, we are called to help kindle the holy fire of love that the Holy Spirit is spreading around the world. May the Spirit inspire you this Pentecost and always, until you sparkle, as God’s glitter, for the joy and salvation of the world. Amen.