

Numbers 11:24-30 ~ Acts 2:1-21

Ignited by the Spirit

May 31, 2020 ~ Day of Pentecost ~ Sacrament of Holy Communion

Communion Meditation

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Introduction to Text:

No more waiting. That was last Sunday, Ascension of the Lord Sunday, the “not many days from now, keep waiting, day.” Today, The Day of Pentecost has arrived! And you are about to hear the story of that day—the one we mark as the beginning, the birth of the church. Instead of candles on a cake: there were tongues of fire on everyone’s head. Luke counts the group at 120 people, all together in one place. Sounds like FPC on a good Sunday—before the pandemic. Today is a great day for this Pentecost story because it points us forward into the future. It’s about God’s visions and dreams for us and for better days ahead.

I don’t think it was an accident that the birth of the church, occurred on the Jewish Feast of Pentecost or Feast of Weeks. This festival marked the end of the celebration of the spring harvest, when Israelite families praised God for God’s grace and bounty. This holiday also became a time of Sinai Covenant renewal. And on this very day came the Holy Spirit to move the followers of Christ, the heirs of the “new covenant” sealed in his blood” from gestation to birth. We know that babies, when they are ready to be born, to do not wait. So--Let us begin!

Meditation:

“Come, Holy Spirit.” The very first day I ever set foot here in FPC, I saw that three-word prayer printed plainly with a faded-red dry-erase marker on a small white board just outside what would become my office. I had come at the invitation of the Pastoral Nominating Committee to preach for them and then have my interview as you were in the process of seeking a new pastor. When I saw that prayer, “Come, Holy Spirit” in the church office I had thought, “Wow, they are either really desperate or extremely spiritual.” Seriously--seeing that prayer at that moment made my heart leap within me. It is exactly the prayer we all need to pray every day. But do we have any clue what we are really asking?

Both of our scripture lessons today delight, amuse, and (if we are honest) may put the fear of the Lord in our bellies. When that Holy Spirit settles on us or in us—crazy and wild stuff can and will happen. Did you see what happened when the Holy Spirit did her thing in these two stories? That Holy Spirit, whether with wind or fire, whether in the desert or in Jerusalem, will mess with more than your hair. We saw what happened when the Spirit of God “rested” on Eldad and Medad, kicking back at the camp, thinking they would just chill and let the other 68 elders handle this one with Moses. And we saw what happened to the 120 believers with Peter in Jerusalem, gathered to celebrate their traditional Feast of Pentecost.

What I love about both of these stories is how real and raw and relatable they are around the edges of the wild and mystical center of these narratives. In the Numbers text, out in the wilderness: Can’t you just see the tattle tale “young man” running to big daddy Moses: “Eldad and Medad aren’t doing it right! They aren’t following the rules! They aren’t supposed to

be prophesying in camp, are they! Then Joshua jumps on the bandwagon of criticism and control. “Yes, Moses, we really should do something about them. They need to learn a lesson. You could be losing control here.” Fast forward to 50 days after Easter in the Book of Acts: you can almost see the eye rollage of the mocking, sneering cosmopolitan crowd of pilgrims, from literally all over the known world, swarming outside the house in Jerusalem with all that loud wind and smoke and shouting inside. “Those crazy country bumpkin Galileans must be drunk or something. How could they possibly be speaking about God’s deeds of power in multiple languages? Give me a break! They can barely speak their own language very well. They were lucky we even let them in to use this house for the holiday.”

But Moses and Peter could see what was going on: The Holy Spirit was on the move: pushing their buttons, mixing it up, flipping the script. “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!” was Moses’ wonderfully expansive and visionary response. And Peter? He stood up, raised his voice and said: “Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose. Listen to what I have to say!” Then he employed Joel’s poetic portrayal of end times blood, fire and smoky mist; dark sun and bloody moon to signify the beginning of a new future, made real and present by the first coming of Christ. *Now* is the time when prophesy can come from anyone at all. *Now* is the time when the gift of the Holy Spirit will empower the least likely persons to show the way forward into God’s vision for the world. Peter takes what Joel saw as the end times, and flips its script into a new beginning. The ushering in of a future where “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

It’s hard to hear that beautiful boundary-bursting promise that Peter ended his sermon with, this morning as the sound of Mr. George Floyd pleading with the police, “I can’t breathe,” is heard around the world. George Floyd called out and was not saved—in this life, anyway. He was killed by a system that Jesus died to change. Mr. Floyd’s last words eerily echoed the last words of Eric Garner on Staten Island in New York in 2014. And the killing this past week in Minneapolis brought others into the national eye: Ahmaud Arbery, in Georgia; Breonna Taylor, in Kentucky; and Tony McDade in Florida. All were people of color who were killed by a system of which we are all a part. This is not a partisan issue. Systemic racism is an ocean we *all* swim in, whatever political party we happen to align with. We must acknowledge this truth: in the US Black people are three times as likely to be killed by the police than white people. This is a script God is calling us to flip.

The death of George Floyd has flooded the streets with people across the country protesting this travesty and so much more. The coronavirus pandemic has pushed to the surface intersecting injustices and ingrained social inequities, that were already making Jesus weep. The disproportionate number of those who were not saved from a COVID-19 death because they were poor or did not have access to adequate health care before the pandemic, is our call to action as Christians. Because we know these are not God’s scripts. But these scripts can be changed. They are part of a system that the Holy Spirit is empowering us to transform.

How *do* we respond to brutality, greed, fear? This is a tough question. The old scripts, the predictable tropes are denial (it’s not really happening), privatism (I’ll just take care of me

and my own), or nostalgia (if only we could get back to the way it used to be). Pentecost invites us to respond otherwise. Pentecost invites us to “utter a new future,” as Walter Brueggemann has written.ⁱ I cannot preach the message of Pentecost today, without proclaiming that I hear the Holy Spirit igniting us to double down on our FPC commitment to be a “Matthew 25 church.” Being a “Matthew 25 church” means we have committed to the three-part prophetic vision articulated by the PC(USA): the call to eradicate systemic poverty, dismantle system racism, and revitalize our congregation.

Come, Holy Spirit. That’s what Pentecost is about. Christmas, Jesus’ birth. Easter, Jesus’ resurrection: Those holidays were God’s doing. God’s gift to this world and to each of us. But Pentecost: that’s on us. It’s about the Holy Spirit igniting us to work together share God’s vision, to be God’s spokespeople (that’s what prophesying is) and to flip the script from our way, to God’s way. To look with God’s eyes and heart. To be a church that wakes up every day and asks, “What breaks God’s heart in this community?”ⁱⁱ And what can we do to mend that hurt, to right those wrongs, to listen to the voices long silenced. That’s what Jesus taught us to do.

The podcast, Invisibilia, tells the story of a group of eight friends gathered around a backyard dinner table in Washington, D.C. Michael Rabdau, along with his wife and 14-year old daughter were enjoying of an amazing evening. It sounded like just the kind of evening we have been missing during the pandemic—lots of food, and excellent French wine, and conversation around the table with good friends. But then all of a sudden, things turned. Michael, beside his wife, saw an arm with a long barrel of a gun, come between them. In that moment, he felt as if the world began moving in slow motion. Everything got quiet.

The gun belonged to a man, medium in height, wearing designer sweats, a stranger to them all. He first raised the gun toward Michael’s friend, Christina, and then to Michael’s wife before saying, “Give me your money.” He kept repeating the same thing over and over again, harsh and angry. “Give me your money.” Fear rose around the table. The man was not joking around... Like so many people today, not a single one of them had any cash. What he wanted, they couldn’t give. No one had any money. So, they started talking, grasping for some way to dissuade the man. They started with guilt. “What would your mother think of you?” one friend asked.

“I don’t have a mother,” he replied, with a few expletives. “Give. Me. Your. Money.” Michael remembers thinking that this was going to end badly. As everyone was filled with panic, Christina piped up with an offer. “You know, we are celebrating,” she said, “Why don’t you have a glass of wine?” All of a sudden, the look on the man’s face changed. It was like a light switch. He took a sip of wine. “That’s a really good glass of wine,” he observed. Then he reached for the cheese and, as he did so, he placed the gun in his pocket. He drank his glass of wine. He ate more cheese. Everyone else stood there, watching, frozen, in that moment.

*And then the intruder said something that no one expected, “**I think I’ve come to the wrong place.**” Quickly, everyone responded with things like, “Oh, hey, yeah, I understand,” and, “Of course, this kind of thing happens.” For a moment they all sat there with the twinkling stars overhead and the sound of chirping insects in the night. And again, the intruder said something*

else that nobody expected. He said, “Can I get a hug?” It was Michael’s wife, who had a gun pointed at her just minutes earlier, who gave him a hug. And then another person from the dinner party. After those hugs, he asked, “Can we have a group hug?” And everyone got up and formed a circle around the man. The experience was beyond strange. When the group hug finished, he simply said, “I’m sorry,” and walked out of the front gate with a glass of wine in his hand. Later that evening after everything had calmed down, the friends found that wine glass neatly placed on the sidewalk by their alley—not thrown, not carelessly discarded—placed.”ⁱⁱⁱ

I think he had come to the right place. Christina, with her simple, but clear and present invitation flipped the script. That was a Pentecost moment. She spoke in a language of acceptance, forgiveness, and love that he understood across whatever else divided them. Pentecost calls us to flip the script and not to let despair define us. Pentecost reminds us that just past the bloody moons and the dark suns is God’s future. Jesus invites us to a Table where we who are scared, uncertain, dismayed or distraught are ushered in and given a seat. At this Table we are given the taste of God’s vision, God’s script. And together, ignited by the Holy Spirit, we too, are empowered to flip the script. Come, one; come all. Come, Holy Spirit.

ⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *Inscribing the Text: Sermons and Prayers of Walter Brueggemann*, (Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis: MN, 2004), pp.114-117.

ⁱⁱ Jan Edmiston, former Moderator of General Assembly, in a lecture she gave to the Presbytery of the Miami Valley, February 12, 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lulu Miller, Hanna Rosin, and Alix Spiegel, “Flip the Script,” *Invisibilia*. Podcast audio, July 15, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/programs/invisibilia/485603559/flip-the-script>, found in Kristy Farber’s article, “Preaching Pentecost in a Secular Context,” *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost 2019.