

Roaring Winds and Flame

By: Meagan McLaughlin

May 31, 2020. Sometimes God comes with words to calm and comfort and reassure. And sometimes God comes to wake us up. Just as the Spirit came upon the disciples in the first Pentecost as roaring winds and flame, we are seeing the Spirit alive today in the city of Minneapolis, as it burns in protest of the murder of George Floyd. The Spirit descends on us too, and frees us to proclaim that healing is possible, even as the fire rages.

Reading: [Acts 2:1-21](#)

*** Transcript ***

Holy Week seems like such an incredibly long time ago, doesn't it? And yet just like that, the weirdest Easter season that most of us have ever experienced is over. But let's think back a minute, to Maundy Thursday, to Good Friday, and find Peter. As they headed into the city to celebrate Passover, the Gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus warned Peter that he would fall. Peter protests that he is ready to go to prison with Jesus, and he will even die with him. But Jesus knows his people. He tells Peter that not only will he not die with Jesus, but he will deny that he even knows him. And of course, we know the rest of the story. Peter does deny Jesus. The cock crows. The others run and hide. And for these fifty days since, except perhaps for essential tasks or brief trips out of the city, the disciples have been keeping kind of a low profile — waiting and watching and listening and wondering, staying out of the way of the Roman guard who they hear are still looking for the ones who were so close to Jesus — as rumors are beginning to spread and grow about the missing body and the empty tomb. "More dangerous dead than alive," warned one of the religious leaders after Jesus' death. Maybe so. Everyone is on edge.

It's that Peter — the one who denied Jesus, the one who hid with his companions, the one who grieved how badly he had failed Jesus just when it counted the most — that we see in our story today from Acts, speaking to a crowd of thousands, shutting down their mocking (of course they aren't drunk, it's only 9:30 in the morning), answering their questions. "It is happening," he tells them, "Just as Joel and the other prophets told us. God is upon us." How did that happen? How did Peter go from denial to prophecy? What emboldened Jesus' followers to come out of their comfort zone and share the good news of life triumphant over death, of God's deeds of power? And that, I suggest, is really the story here, this Pentecost Sunday. What happened?

There is so much that hadn't changed, prior to the events of this reading. Jesus' death was still real, his resurrection, confusing and maybe a bit scary as well as hopeful, his ascension, as perplexing as it was devastating. The authorities were still looking for Jesus' followers. The disciples, as of yet, really hadn't left their Upper Room. Hadn't told the stories outside the circle of trusted followers. Still hadn't figured out what on earth they were supposed to be doing, what it all meant. So what happened?

When Jesus and Peter were talking, before the Supper, and Peter claimed he was ready to die, Jesus told him that on the contrary Peter would deny even knowing him. Jesus also said something else important. "But I have prayed for you, Peter, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your siblings." When you have turned back, strengthen your siblings. And if we remember last week's gospel, even before Jesus died he had made another promise, perhaps following up on this promise to Peter. "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever, the Spirit of truth." All along the way, Jesus promised that we would not be alone. God would be with us. Hard to believe with all that had taken place, but the disciples were

trying.

And so, we come to the events of Pentecost. The disciples are expecting something to happen — Jesus told them he would be sending a comforter. They had gathered in anticipation of this, not knowing what to expect. And then the Spirit showed up. Jesus often said, “Peace be with you,” “Be not afraid,” to his disciples when he came upon them after he rose from the dead. Angels would often say this too, when they appeared to unsuspecting humans, who would understandably be caught off guard by a heavenly being making an appearance. But in the Pentecost reading, there are no words of comfort or peace. Roaring winds, filling their room, locked doors and all. Flames of fire, leaping down and resting on their heads. And then suddenly, they are all filled with words that can't be held in, pouring out of them in languages they didn't even know! I was talking about this story recently with one of you, who suggested that perhaps not all of the words the disciples spoke were, strictly speaking, “good news.” I recall moments when I have been taken by surprise so profoundly that I couldn't think clearly enough to put words on it myself, and I can imagine the words that might have escaped my mouth if I had been there that day!

Sometimes, God comes with words to calm and comfort and reassure. And sometimes, God comes to WAKE US UP! Pentecost is one of those days, family of faith! Just as fire in a forest can transform and clear the way for new life, the fires of Pentecost, the Spirit come to the disciples, transformed them forever. They had been afraid, and rightly so. Peter had been so afraid he denied that he even knew Jesus. The Spirit came, and in spite of their fear, they embodied courage and spoke the truth of the good news of God they knew to anyone who would listen.

There is so much fear and grief, morphed into understandable anger and rage, at the death of yet one more black man, George Floyd, murdered on the streets of Minneapolis. As my pastor from my Minneapolis home church, just half a block from the Minneapolis 3rd precinct, said, “My city is on fire.” My city is on fire. The fear is palpable, for those living in it, and those watching from afar. And the courage of those speaking truth, ministering in the midst of that fire, calling for an end to the deep, systemic racism that is fueling it, is undeniable. The Spirit is alive.

The disciples had been cut off, hidden away, and the Spirit removed all barriers between them and their neighbors — even language. Think about how often we misunderstand one another, even our closest people, when we speak the same language, and we can get a glimpse of what a miracle this was — that everyone present, regardless of their national origin, or ethnicity, or language, understood what was being said. No longer cut off, they were suddenly connected with everyone around them. Any idea that God would only speak to certain people, of a certain culture, of a certain language, in certain ways, was dispelled, and the Spirit of God insisted on being accessible to everyone, despite our human limitations.

And speaking of limitations... Peter, the one who denied Jesus, the one who failed to be there for his dear friend, who had really screwed up, is still called! The Spirit filled him, empowered him, and he found himself able to share the incredibly good news of God's mercy and redemption and joy-filled power, with literally thousands. That news has travelled 2,000 years, to us here in the middle of the days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite our human limitations, the Spirit comes to us in the midst of the isolation and fear of illness and unknown future, in the grief surrounding over 103,000 people who have died from COVID-19 in this country. The Spirit has come. In the midst of the very real barriers that divide us, the scourge of systemic racism that binds every single one of us, deeply wounding and oppressing living, breathing human beings, bringing death and fear and destruction and untold misery in its wake, the Spirit has come.

The Spirit descends on us — not quietly and peacefully, but in roaring and in fire. It surrounds and fills us, and sends us out to proclaim the radical news of God’s abundant love, and grace, and justice to this world. We are freed and called to learn how to stand in the midst of pandemics and racism and all the evils of this world, and proclaim that God’s justice and will must prevail, even when it feels scary and risky to do so. We are freed to proclaim that healing is possible, even as the fire rages. We are freed to do everything we can to claim that all people are worthy and beloved children of God, WITH, and not in spite of, our differences. In other words, this is the day we are cut loose, freed from the limitations of our Upper Rooms, to be the church in the world.

The disciples, like us, were not “prepared” to be the church in their time, but the Spirit came and led them, and they were the church. Like the disciples, we too are set free to embody the promise of God in new ways. We too are being transformed, to be the church in our place and time, in ways we couldn’t even fathom three months ago, and we are still discovering as we navigate our way forward together.

Sustained and inspired and strengthened and blessed by the Holy Spirit, we will watch and wait with faith and hope for signs that it is safe to return to our common spaces, while staying physically distant to keep one another, and especially those most vulnerable, safe. And in the meantime, we are called, just like Peter was and the rest of the disciples, to strengthen one another on this journey. We are in this together, together cut loose, freed to be the church, and with the power of the Holy Spirit we will faithfully embody the love and the justice and promise of our God, that essential work that we as people of God have always been called to do, since the very first Pentecost.

Thanks be to God.

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