

## Pentecost – Year B

The last few days have been touched by both tragedy and joy. On Friday morning, another young person used guns to injure and take the life of classmates, teachers, and officers, leaving so many people in shock and grief and suffering, and leaving some hopeless in the face violence repeated so often that we become inured to it. Then yesterday, the world had the opportunity to celebrate a royal wedding that, through deliberate choice, managed to be all about love and the celebration of diversity. I don't doubt that many of us were awake early, watching the wedding, and feeling proud of our Presiding Bishop as he delivered a homily in his characteristic style, one that the worshipers in St. George's chapel had not previously experienced, at least within those walls. It could have seemed as the scene we heard described in Acts, the Holy Spirit so clearly invoked and speaking in many languages in that glorious chapel with people from so many worlds.

And so it is that our scripture readings today have so much to say to us on this feast of Pentecost. The Jewish day of Pentecost traditionally celebrated the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai. There, God appears amid thunder, lightning, earthquake, cloud, and fire. Those signs marked God's presence on the Mountain – and in the Law given there. So when we hear the account of Pentecost in Acts, let us not miss those same images: “Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit...” Let us not miss the message that God, God's Spirit, is now not just on the mountain or in the law, but in God's people. God's Spirit, God's presence, is in God's people.

That can seem so much easier to see and believe in experiences like a wedding where guests have gathered *in* love to *celebrate* love, and where the Spirit-driven energy of a Michael Curry fans the *flame* of love by calling us to imagine what the world could be if we all lived in that love in *all* aspects of our lives.

It can be so much harder to see God's presence in God's people, God's Spirit in the world, when we are faced with tragedy.

Ah, but that is precisely what we see addressed in the reading from Ezekiel. Ezekiel is writing from exile in Babylonia. The first section of the book of Ezekiel is full of dire prophecies, telling people what havoc God will wreak because of the unfaithfulness of the people of Israel, which many people discounted – until they were captured, their land taken away, Jerusalem and the temple destroyed, and the people scattered in exile. Once that destruction has taken place, Ezekiel’s writings turn to themes of hope and restoration – for the last third of that book, from which our text this morning comes. Ezekiel has a vision of a valley full of dry bones. Only near the end of the reading do we hear what they mean. “Then the Lord said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’” -- Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost. We are cut off completely.

It is that sense of despair that can grip us when we are repeatedly faced with suffering, especially suffering caused by the violence of others. We can move to that despair when we are separated from one another by talk and action that incites division. And, God forbid, that despair can turn into indifference when I think that as long as *my* world is safe, the violence and hate speech and divisiveness doesn’t really mean much.

I had lunch this past week with a friend and former co-worker, now retired. We mostly talked of shared acquaintances, state employment, his joy in retirement. For a few brief moments, though, “politics” raised its head. And my friend said, “Well, I have to say that for me and my family, nothing much has changed with Trump, so I can’t say I’m too concerned about anything.” And so I had to talk of graffiti painted on churches, signs left on windshields, perpetrators of hate speech or hate crimes feeling as if they have license to act now – and to recall with him Martin Niemöller’s quotation: “First they came for the socialists, and I did nothing, because I was not a socialist...” You know the rest. As I looked back on our conversation, in the light of this reading from Ezekiel, I saw the Spirit breathing life into dry bones... the dry bones of apathy or indifference or despair. The Spirit encouraging us to action.

That is the promise in this Ezekiel passage. Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” Indeed. “Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people... And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit *within* you, and you shall live...” It is that same promise – made manifest in the same great wind and breath of God – that is present in the Pentecost described in Acts. God’s Spirit, God’s presence, is in God’s people.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples, and us, repeatedly that it is better that he go, so that the Advocate, the Spirit, can come. I’m not sure the disciples were consoled. But the truth that came to me about these words this time around as I sat with them is this: As long as we hold onto the notion that the Incarnation stopped with Jesus, then we are left bereft – as those disciples on the road to Emmaus or the ones gathered in a locked upper room – when the physical presence of Jesus is gone. But if we can dare to believe the message in the vision of Ezekiel, the message in the wind and the fire from Mt. Sinai coming upon the believers gathered in Jerusalem – if we can dare to believe the message that God’s Spirit, God’s presence, is in God’s people – then we will indeed find that we have life. We cannot live out God’s presence within us and continue to dwell in graves of indifference and despair.

I will leave us this morning with a quote from Brennan Manning – “The gospel is absurd and the life of Jesus is meaningless unless we believe that He lived, died, and rose again with but one purpose in mind: to make brand-new creation. Not to make people with better morals but to create a community of prophets and professional lovers, men and women who would surrender to the mystery of the fire of the Spirit that burns within, who would live in ever greater fidelity to the omnipresent Word of God, who would enter into the center of it all, the very heart and mystery of Christ, into the center of the flame that consumes, purifies, and sets everything aglow with peace, joy, boldness, and extravagant, furious love. This, my friend, is what it really means to be a Christian.”  
-Brennan Manning 1934-2013

- [Ezekiel 37:1-14](#)
- [Acts 2:1-21](#)
- [John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15](#)
- [Psalm 104:25-35, 37](#)