

Wake Up!

Peter JB Carman
May 24, 2015, Pentecost

Acts 2:1-21
Ezekiel 37:1-14

I.

While the nation observes Memorial Day weekend, the church celebrates Pentecost! But just what is Pentecost? One of the least noticed holidays in the Christian year is Pentecost. At least on this continent, there is no civil observation of the day, no Pentecost sales, no day off from school. Yet in the grand history of Christianity it is one of the high holidays.

Sometimes called the “Birthday of the church” the event Pentecost marks took place on the Jewish festival, seven weeks—fifty days actually—after Passover, a day that celebrated the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai! Yet Pentecost rapidly came to have its own meaning for the followers of Jesus. For it was on that festive day, several weeks following the death and resurrection of Jesus, that the followers of Christ who were gathered in Jerusalem experienced the Spirit of God in a whole new way. The word for Spirit in both Hebrew and Greek does not mean “spirit” in the way we often think of it—as a ghost. The word means breath. It also means wind! And it suggests the presence, the very close presence, the MOVEMENT of God. They who had experienced the aching longing for one who was no longer with them, who had been immersed in Christ’s absence, suddenly knew God was in the midst of them.

As our first scripture reading this morning describes it, something happened that first Pentecost that seemed almost beyond the power of words to convey: a sound like a loud rushing wind; divided tongues of fire, a tongue resting on each of them, many people speaking, able to understand each other as though in their own languages—people so carried away that others sneered and said they were drunk!

Something happened that Pentecost day, something that turned the world upside down, not only for the first followers of Jesus, who had lost their friend, but for many others, who that day, beholding evidence of the reality and power and presence of God’s Spirit, chose to be baptized.

And why do some of us wear red? To celebrate the Spirit’s power, the flames that rested on the people who gathered that first Pentecost, and the fire of God’s Spirit that continues to move, creating love in the place of fear, and hope in the place of despair!

II.

This year at Pentecost, we celebrate two events in the world that took place yesterday that mark the reality that the Spirit is still alive and kicking. Yesterday marked the beatification of Archbishop Oscar Romero, the first step toward his being named officially a saint in the Roman Catholic Church. A conservative priest who listened to the poor and was transformed into a leading advocate for justice and human rights, Romero was martyred while serving Mass. In a time of tremendous violence and harsh censorship, the archbishop read out loud information about the previous week’s human rights violations every week on the radio. The day before he was killed in his final recorded sermon he closed with these words:

In the name of God, in the name of this suffering people whose cries rise to heaven more loudly each day, I implore you, I beg you, I order you in the name of God: stop the repression.

For years, forces within and without the Church have fought to delay the declaration of Romero's sainthood, precisely **because** he stood with the suffering masses. It is a new day.

We also cannot let this birthday party for the church of Jesus Christ go by without observing that yesterday the people of Ireland, a very religious and indeed Christian nation, voted—overwhelmingly-- to affirm that love and family belong as much to gay and lesbian people as to heterosexuals, legalizing same-gender marriage. The Spirit is not done moving yet! It is a new day! Wake up!

III.

So what does Pentecost, that crazy event so long ago, have to do with us, in this town, right here and right now? We need to look at what the day was really about. Pentecost is the day we remember for the arrival of a fresh Spirit, a new level of communication, new energy. And it is also about the birth of new understanding, new openness, new willingness to take risks for the sake of truth and justice and love. Pentecost is the day people learned that a very live, very wild and very present God was right in the midst of them. Pentecost symbolizes understanding between people who came from different languages and cultures. Pentecost is the arrival of a fresh spirit that causes people of faith to share what they have—from those who have much with those who had little. Pentecost was—and remains—a story about the dreams of that ancient prophet Ezekiel, who walked in a valley of dry bones: dead dried up dreams and hopes, a people who had lost their hope, lost their reality, lost their life together. In that dream, the wind of God blows upon the dried up bones, puts flesh on the bones and reassembles not just the army of a new nation- but the body of a new humanity, out of the dusty dried up despair of yesterday.

We tend to think of the signs of Pentecost as being the rushing wind, the movement of a breath; we hear the clatter of bones coming together, we see the tongues of fire. But there are other less obvious signs! It is a sign of the Holy Spirit's presence when two people who speak different languages and do not trust each other come together as one. Wake up! It is a sign of the Spirit's presence and power when people who had given up stand up: to speak against injustice; to reach out in love to humanity! Wake up! It is a sign of the Spirit's reality when those whose religion was a thing of the past, ancient creeds recited over and over, discover a new living conviction, start to really live and breathe and talk the kind of Love which Jesus taught. Wake up! It is a sign of the Spirit's presence and power when aging congregations decide their work is not done yet—that there is love to be shared, hope to be offered, strangers to be received, children to be raised in the knowledge of Christ. This congregation, this Emmanuel Friedens Church, is one more sign of the Spirit's power and reality. Wake up, bones of the past! Come together, hopes raised up from the dust.

Now, I for one find cynicism about human beings easier and more comfy than this kind of hopefulness. Yet cynicism is really despair dressed up nice. And our experience as companions of Christ is that just when we are about to give up, we witness the resurrection of hope and courage once more. You and I have seen this kind of transformation again and again. I have seen churches reborn. We have seen the Berlin Wall come down. We have seen, just yesterday, a worldwide church

body recognize a priest who was a human rights advocate for the poorest of the poor, recognize officially that this is holiness. You and I have seen ordinary fearful people do extraordinary loving things, because they were under the influence—under the Spirit’s influence.

When it has been becoming particularly institutional the church has often summarized its faith in creeds and confessions. Just a few years ago one Pentecost I realized that our convictions look different under the Spirit’s influence, when we understand that God lives and moves and shakes up the old assumptions. Now if any one might not want to commit their beliefs to paper it is your pastor, who may after all be a heretic. But that year I wrote them down. I want to close this morning’s reflection by sharing with you one heretical Christian’s credo. This is what Pentecost means to me.

Convictions

Pentecost, May 27, 2007, Peter JB Carman

There is one God, maker of the universe.

*This is the God who spoke to Moses from the burning bush, and who, when asked for a name, said simply
I AM.*

*This is the God who rescued Joseph from the slave-pit,
who has delivered women and men, children and youths, time and time again.*

*Known only in shards and fragments, this God has been revealed
in the campfires of frightened sojourners and the bright starlight over sages’ heads,
from a mountaintop at Sinai, and speaking from caves in a still small voice.*

This is the God in whose image is every human.

*Called by many names, this One who is beyond all naming is known
by all the peoples of the earth.*

*This is the God whom Jesus called Abba, the God we now know as pure unbounded
Love.*

*I am a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth, a teacher who lived and traveled among a captive people
two thousand years ago.*

*He lived a short time, healing the sick, repairing broken minds and hearts,
declaring freedom for the prisoner and proclaiming a day of Jubilee for all of humankind.
He blessed the peacemaker, the persecuted, the children of the world, and the poor in spirit and body.
For his daring and innocence, faithfulness and willingness to point to the Sovereignty of God alone,
he was put to death on a cross, executed like a bandit or rebellious slave.*

*On the third day his followers found the tomb empty,
and the same day experienced him in the midst of them.*

*They knew him in the breaking of bread and the touch of nail-pierced hands.
Ever since, those who follow him have been living by his example,
trying to make sense of and follow his challenging teachings.*

I am one of these followers.

*I serve God and my neighbors,
claiming no special knowledge, owning no extra faith credentials.*

I walk the same resurrection road with rich and poor, people of every nation and tongue.

Miracles occur on this path every day, moments of communion and grace.

*I have experienced the same Spirit—the same breath—that I am convinced filled Jesus.
Blowing where it will, this wind of God makes saints out of criminals,*

*calls children and old people to extraordinary deeds of mercy and grace.
It makes the unloved capable of loving, it restores families and peoples.
This sacred Spirit compels us to form communities of faith we call churches.
Real churches are built not on any foundation of uniform doctrine,
built not of bricks or stone, but of better stuff.
They are temples made of minds and hearts, souls and bodies: assemblies of frail humans.
We come together in gatherings great and small,
ordinary people in communion in spite of our differences,
by the power of the same extraordinary Spirit, a Pentecost Spirit,
a Spirit that allows understanding instead of estrangement, and creates hope in the place of despair.
Mine is a this-worldly faith, believing the Commonwealth of God begins in the here and now,
on earth as it will some day be in heaven.
It is a tenacious faith, sustained some days with the support of reason,
and continued even on days when it might be more reasonable to give it up!
It is a faith rooted in the experienced grace of God, and observation of the ability of God to transform humans with
love, over and over and over again.
It is a pilgrim faith, never finished, never complete, a little more learned each day
from the other pilgrims whose paths mine crosses.
I believe in a path of restoration for all creation: life and wholeness restored repeatedly through
forgiveness, healing and redemption.*

Happy Birthday, Church. We are a people called, and God's Spirit is capable of blowing us where it wills. May we find the faith to let it move, let it breathe through us.

For Memorial Day

In the early 1990's, my mother, a survivor of the second world war from the Netherlands, reached out to her friend Iris, who had grown up in Germany through that same terrible conflict. One had a son who was protesting the new war in the middle east. The other had a son who was an officer in the marines, stationed somewhere in the middle east, she knew not where.

The two women shared their grief and the terror of memory.

Let us stand as we are able.

On this day before Memorial Day you and I stand together to remember the dead of many wars.

We remember with grief those known to us and beloved of us, who will never return home.

We remember the soldiers in uniform who have served this nation;

We remember the many civilians who have died in war,

Sometimes simply called "collateral damage".

We remember as well the dead of our enemies,
and the mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers they have left behind.

May God hold them in God's hand of mercy,

And grant them comfort and peace.

And may God guide us, the living,

in the creation of a world where war is no more,
and mothers and fathers need no longer fear for the lives of their children,
nor children grieve the loss of their parents, sisters and brothers.

Amen.