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The Dream of Pentecost

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Acts 2:1-17

I cannot imagine a more apt biblical text for us to hear on this day, at the end of this week, than the story of Pentecost. Wind. Fire. Noise. Chaos. It sounds a lot like our beloved city in recent days.

Minneapolis has been burning. National Guard troops are in the streets. At night we've been under strict curfew and cannot leave our homes - it's Covid quarantine again, only this time enforced by Humvees and troop carriers. During the day dozens of marches and protests swarm different areas, giving voice to the anger all around.

Last Tuesday I texted Arika Galloway, our good friend who serves as co-pastor of Liberty Church in north Minneapolis with her husband Ralph. I wanted to express our sorrow over the killing of George Floyd. She replied right away. "No words," she wrote. That was all. *No words.*

Yet we are a people of the Word. We come to worship to hear the Word. Our lives depend on words. Words can sometimes communicate more than what they seem to say. They can sound out and convey the pain of centuries and carry the long anguish of a people. The words don't need to be numerous or particularly eloquent. Sometimes the simpler the words, the plainer the meaning.

Like, "I can't breathe."

Words carry meaning, and meaning can set us on fire, and then more words can fan the flames, until the chaos drowns them out and we can no longer remember what was said in the first place. Let us begin today with these words, lest we forget: "I can't breathe."

Local and national histories of racism and police brutality have consequences. The city is convulsing with rage. Indeed, cities all across the nation are infused with fury. The streets are filled with angry young people from the African American community, joined by thousands of other young whites, Latinx, Native people, Asian Americans, and immigrants. I was at a protest on Thursday and was surely the oldest person there. Young Muslim women in hijabs were carrying signs and joining the cry for justice. A young white woman wearing a Grinnell College "computer nerd" t-shirt was there. Nurses. Young families. People in wheelchairs. Spanish-speakers. Somalis. Dakota. Hmong. A young couple from Westminster.

“Say his name!” The cry went up. “George Floyd,” came the shouted response. It’s been an antiphonal liturgy of public grief and fury echoing this week in every neighborhood.

Yesterday I rode my bike to the memorial mural at 38th and Chicago. It was early morning. The intersection had been blocked off –not by any ugly barricades, but by heaps of fragrant lilacs. Purple and white, the flowers signaled sacred space. People spoke in hushed tones, as if in an open, urban sanctuary. They were weeping, praying, standing in silent vigil. One older white man was kneeling on the pavement with his head bowed.

I can’t breathe.

Pentecost reminds us that the air we breathe is the Spirit of God. That holy wind blows in good times and in bad times. It blows in turbulent times. It was there at creation over the swirling waters. It was there when Moses climbed the mountain to receive God’s word. It was there with the prophets of old. It appeared at Pentecost and has sustained the church for 2,000 years – and it has been churning through our city this week.

George Floyd’s unintended bequest to us was to frame the struggle for human dignity in a new way. It is the struggle to breathe, the struggle and the gasping and the yearning for the very air that animates our bodies and brings life to our souls – the longing for freedom when the weight of oppression crushes our chest and closes our throat.

I wonder if Pentecost could have happened without the wind and the fire and the noise. Were the leaping tongues of flame really necessary? The Spirit could have been poured out, perhaps, in a gentler way. There's even biblical precedent for that. Remember when Elijah was hiding in the wilderness and an angel told him that God was about to pass by? Here's what happened...

“Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.” (I Kings 19:11-12)

Pentecost recreates Elijah's desert experience, only this time God *is* in the wind and in the flame and in the shuddering earth. There is no sound of sheer silence. Not yet. The Holy Spirit descends with a bang, so as not to be missed. God wants to get the attention of everybody there, and it seems to have succeeded – but even in the midst of all that chaos, people quickly begin looking for other interpretations.

Sometimes we forget the words we hear and ignore the things we see. And know are true.

People in Jerusalem that day long ago try to say that something else is happening, that the wonder of harmony among such diverse people does not truly occur. They say it's a figment of the

imagination, the product of too much drink, some wild-eyed aspiration that could never be possible.

And then Peter gets up to preach. He begins by refuting those who say that the people experiencing the miracle of shared understanding are not all drunk, because, he says, it's still early in the day – which shows how much Peter knows about such things.

And then he really begins to preach. He starts by remembering words, words God spoke through the prophet Joel 800 years earlier:

“I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.”

We are witnesses – you and I – in our city to that prophetic word come to life. I don't mean in the looting and the burning and the destruction, but, rather, in the unrelenting insistence on change. America's sons and daughters are in the streets, and they have a word for us to hear: *Enough! Stop calling for peace when there is no justice, and if you don't know the things that make for justice we will show you.*

I'm ready to get out of the way and to let the young lead, to let this be an intergenerational movement, where we embrace one another's wisdom across the ages. We've tried in our generation, we have tried, but not made much headway. Yes, there has been progress, but those on the receiving end of racial injustice still

suffer. Covid-19 has peeled back any pretense of significant improvement and laid bare the huge disparities in education and healthcare and employment and economic vitality and life expectancy and power.

This uprising is not merely the result of one incident, as tragic as it was. This is the heaving of generations of anguish and long-sublimated anger breaking through the surface.

It feels like some things never change. The litany of lynchings in recent times is long. *Say the names*: George Floyd, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Philando Castile, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, and the list marches on.

A group of us had planned to go to Duluth next month to remember the lives of Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhie, who were taken while in police custody for an assault for which there was no evidence, and hanged by a mob, 100 years ago, on June 15.

I can't breathe.

Someone emailed me this week reacting to the electronic sign in front of the church that has said *Black Lives Matter* since last Tuesday.

"All lives matter," they wrote, and added that the church should not get involved in controversy. If *all* lives truly mattered then we wouldn't have the terrible history of violence against black lives,

against black folks in this land and we wouldn't have an achievement gap between black and white students that's closing so slowly black kids won't likely catch up for nearly two centuries. So yes, we have to say that black lives matter because they haven't for so long in America.

(<https://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/data-mine/2016/01/13/achievement-gap-between-white-and-black-students-still-gaping>)

And to the other point raised in that email, if the church isn't getting involved in controversy, then it's not doing its job, it's not following Jesus, who was crucified for doing that very thing.

"If white folks weren't awake before," Alika said to me yesterday, "It's time to wake up now."

The prophet was right: *your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.*

The young people in the streets have a vision: that violence against black people would stop, that law enforcement would be held accountable, and that deep-seated inequities based on racism would finally be rooted out.

Those are not unreasonable – or even controversial – demands, and they should sound familiar to us in the context of worship. Those are biblical words. Those are scriptural values. That is the teaching of Jesus reflecting the hope of God for the human community.

They also sound like what American democracy was designed to do – until we remember that back then, when foundational words like “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” were written, they were not meant for everyone.

In an Open Letter to White Clergy this week, Native American pastor Jim Bear Jacobs and friend of Westminster reminds us that the U.S. Constitution

“Didn’t codify into...law that *you* were less than fully human. The Constitution didn’t have to be amended to grant that *you* were not property. The Constitution...works great for *you*, but make no mistake, it was never meant to protect Black and Brown people.”

[\(https://healingmnstories.wordpress.com/2020/05/30/an-open-letter-to-white-clergy-on-george-floyds-murder-and-the-current-unrest/\)](https://healingmnstories.wordpress.com/2020/05/30/an-open-letter-to-white-clergy-on-george-floyds-murder-and-the-current-unrest/)

The change our system needs will not be easy. Power and privilege do not generally relinquish their place freely.

Alika called yesterday to tell me that African American churches were being threatened with burning.

“They always go to the churches,” she said, “Because that’s where the prophetic voice is strongest in the black community.”

Wind. Fire. Noise. Chaos. If this is Pentecost I had no idea the heat and the blowing violence lasted this long.

Alika quoted the words from James Weldon Johnson's great poem:

Stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died.

We're in that time now, Alika said, that's what it feels like, the time when hope unborn has died. But then she quoted the rest of the verse:

Yet with a steady beat have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our parents sighed?
We have come over a way that with tears has been watered.
We have come, treading our path
 through the blood of the slaughtered.
Out from the gloomy past, till now we stand at last,
Where the white beam of our bright star is cast.

When hope unborn finally breaks forth it must sound something like that day long ago in Jerusalem and maybe like what's happening in our city today. It must look something like the rising vision of the young, and the prophetic wisdom of our children.

It is the dream of Pentecost. It comes in on the wind and begins to change the world so that justice rolls down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

May it be so, in our time.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.