

Pentecost B 2021 Sermon

Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place. And 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 and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs-- in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

*`In the last days it will be, God declares,
 that 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.*

*Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.*

*And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.*

*The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.*

Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.' "

It has been said that our problem in understanding the Holy Spirit is that we have no image for it. We can speak about God as Father, and "father" gives us something familiar and personal to relate to. And we can certainly imagine God as Son, since God the Son took human flesh in Jesus. We can imagine ourselves loving, and being loved by, God the Father and God the Son.

But the Holy Spirit is a different ball of wax. Yes, we are told that the Spirit descended “like a dove” on Jesus at his baptism; but what does “like a dove” mean? We’ve all seen paintings of an actual white dove descending on Jesus at his baptism; but some Bible scholars wonder whether “like a dove” refers to the *sound* the Spirit made – and so we have a hymn to the Holy Spirit which begins, “Like the murmur of a dove’s song...”¹

The story of Pentecost in the Book of Acts speaks of “a sound like the rush of a violent wind filling the room where the disciples were gathered, and divided tongues, as of fire, appearing among them, with a tongue resting on each of them.” (No murmuring dove anywhere to be seen.) And we’ve all seen artists’ depictions of that Pentecost event, with little flames hovering over the heads of the disciples.

But somehow, all these descriptive images and similes still don’t help us *imagine* the Holy Spirit. We know the Spirit isn’t *really* a dove and isn’t *really* a flame on top of someone’s head. Even if it were, how does one *relate* to a dove or a flame? And it doesn’t help that, at various places in the Bible, the Spirit is spoken of as “he,” “she,” and “it.”

A significant part of our problem, John Shea suggests, is that “people are more familiar with *physical* and *social* reality than they are with *spiritual* reality.”² We are more familiar with *physical* and *social* reality than we are with *spiritual* reality. Spiritual reality is not something we can sense with any of our 5 senses; and yet it is perhaps even *more* real than anything we can feel, smell, see, hear, or taste. Dr. Shea suggests that we can approach this **spiritual** reality through *another* sense: our sense of longing, thirst, hunger.³

British priest Sam Wells identifies 2 kinds of hunger. “There’s a hunger that has a name,” he writes. “It’s a hunger where you **know** what you want but you haven’t got it or can’t have it... when you long with all your heart to have a baby, but it’s not happening; where you’re dying for something to eat, but the cupboard’s bare...

“But there’s *another* kind of hunger,” Dr. Wells continues. “It’s a hunger that lingers deep, disturbingly, in the bottom of your soul, but it doesn’t have a name. There’s no simple solution to it, no hot meal or job title or box ticket that will satisfy it.

“[W]e can all express vividly what the **first** kind of hunger feels like—... what it’s like to devour a meal when you’ve been waiting hours and are feeling faint and beginning to shake with longing for food. But the *second* kind of hunger—that’s more difficult.”⁴

Dr. Wells illustrates these two kinds of hunger by recalling the Old Testament history of the people of Israel, who lived for 50 years in forced exile in Babylon.

The people of Israel were “focused on the first kind of hunger—quite simply, ‘I want to go home.’ Everything that was wrong was crystallized in one simple fact—Israel was a thousand miles from the Promised Land,”⁵ from their homes and from the Temple where they worshipped and offered sacrifices to **their** God, Yahweh.

Then, after 50 long years, “Israel *did* go home from Babylon. Israel *did* return to the Promised Land. Jerusalem *was* restored, the Temple rebuilt, the walls raised again. But when all that was done, Israel was still hungry... It turned out going home wasn’t all that Israel was hungry for.”⁶ The hunger that they could name – longing for home – was satisfied when they returned. But they were still beset by that *second* kind of hunger, that longing that doesn’t have a name.

My friends, I find that story of the Jewish Exile and the return from Exile to be analogous and relevant to our own time. For we, too, during a year of enforced *pandemic* “exile,” if you will, have experienced a kind of hunger which we can clearly name. Like those ancient Jews, we have wanted to **return** from our forced exile and take up our lives where we had left off. Freely and fully worshipping together in church, just as we had before. Collapsing the 6 foot distancing, and hugging one another once again. Being able to see each others’ smiles, unhidden by masks; able to visit relatives in nursing homes; able to travel once again. This hunger, this longing to return, is easily identified and named. And it is beginning to be satisfied, as we return to in-person worship, return to eating at restaurants, return to travelling, lowering our masks and collapsing the distancing.

But when all of these *named* hungers are satisfied, will our hunger cease? Or, like those ancient Israelites after they returned home from exile, will we find in **ourselves** that *second* hunger, that inner longing for something deeper?

In her book *The Interior Castle*, 16th-Century Spanish nun and mystic Teresa of Avila describes 7 rooms in the metaphorical “castle” of our soul; 7 stages on our journey to deeper union with God. She says that one of the temptations on the spiritual journey “is the temptation to feel satisfied with where we are. Moving through the first three rooms of the interior castle, she says, we might begin to feel that we have found a stopping place.”⁷ Once we can return to our lives as they were before the exile of the pandemic, we might be tempted to be satisfied.

But “Teresa wants us to be *dissatisfied*. There’s so much more to explore on the path to God... We can love more; we can act with more [compassion and] justice and truth. We have the capacity for so much more transformation...”⁸ There is still that strong, unnamed hunger in our soul that calls us to go deeper. It is *God’s longing for us*, implanted in our soul, which is the source of our *own* inner longing for union with God and one another.

“In Christian tradition,” writes Richard Rohr, “we call such implanted longing the indwelling Holy Spirit. The Spirit keeps yearning in us for union with more...”⁹

More of ourselves; more of community with one another and the world; more of God.

My friends, this past year has been wearing, exhausting, and draining. Our lives have been upended, and there is within us that strong urge to just get back to “normal.” But because we have been away from that “old normal” for such an extended period, we have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see with fresh eyes, see possibilities in forging a “new normal” far *better* than the old. More compassionate. More joyful. More vibrant. More meaningful. More life-filled. And the somewhat counterintuitive reality is that in order to create a new and better “normal” *out there*, we must start by going beneath the surface of life, and get in touch with that deep, *inner* hunger for **spiritual** reality; that implanted, inner longing which is the Holy Spirit.

As we gradually emerge from this pandemic exile and begin to re-establish life within our Christ Church community, let us not simply seek to satisfy our old, named hungers, to revert to “what we’ve always done.” God did not bring on this pandemic, but God **can** use it – *wants* to use it! – to form a new world which is better than the old: more compassionate, loving, generous, and alive with the Spirit.

My friends, let us use this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see with fresh eyes, God’s eyes, and go deeper. I truly believe that this is what God has *always* been calling our Christ Church family to do: to go deeper in our worship; deeper in our learning; deeper in our relationships; deeper in our prayer; deeper in our love, compassion, forgiveness, and generosity; deeper in our service to God, our neighbor, and God’s wondrous creation. And as we go deeper, we will get in touch with that implanted hunger, God’s Holy Spirit, who not only shares with us God’s yearning for a better world, but empowers us to bring it to reality: our new, Spirit-filled normal.

AMEN

1 *Hymnal 1982* #513

2 John Shea, *Following Love into Mystery*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010, p. 1941

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 195-197

4 Samuel Wells, “The hunger that no meal satisfies,” *The Christian Century*, [Feb 14, 2018 issue](#)

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

7 Stephanie Paulsell, “As the world reopens post-pandemic, how will we find our way in it?”, *The Christian Century*, [May 19, 2021 issue](#)

8 *Ibid.*

9 “[Purity and Passion](#)”, Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditation, Monday, November 13, 2017