

“LIGHTING FIRES”
PENTECOST SUNDAY, 2020
ACTS 2:1-21

Ahmaud Arbery. Breonna Taylor. George Floyd. Three unrelated Black Americans from Georgia, Kentucky, and Minnesota-- three unjustifiable killings. Families destroyed. Communities shattered. Trust for law enforcement in neighborhoods of color is non-existent. The coronavirus rages; storms terrorize much of the country; and now fires are burning in protest of centuries of systemic racism in this country where all are supposed to live free. What is the Spirit saying to the church in Acts 2:1-21?

A Sound Like a Strong Wind

2¹⁻⁴ When the Feast of Pentecost came, the [remnant disciples] were all together in one place. Without warning there was a sound like a strong wind, gale force—no one could tell where it came from. It filled the whole building. Then, like a wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks, and they started speaking in a number of different languages as the Spirit prompted them.

5-11 There were many Jews staying in Jerusalem just then, devout pilgrims from all over the world. When they heard the sound, they came on the run. Then when they heard, one after another, their own mother tongues being spoken, they were thunderstruck. They couldn't for the life of them figure out what was going on, and kept saying, “Aren't these all Galileans? How come we're hearing them talk in our various mother tongues?”

Parthians, Medes, and Elamites;
Visitors from Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia,
Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia,
Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene;
Immigrants from Rome, both Jews and proselytes;
Even Cretans and Arabs!

“They're speaking our languages, describing God's mighty works!”

¹² Their heads were spinning; they couldn't make head or tail of any of it. They talked back and forth, confused: “What's going on here?”

¹³ Others joked, “They're drunk on cheap wine.”

Peter Speaks Up

¹⁴⁻²¹ That's when Peter stood up and, backed by the other eleven, spoke out with bold urgency: “Fellow Jews, all of you who are visiting Jerusalem, listen carefully and get this story straight.

These people aren't drunk as some of you suspect. They haven't had time to get drunk—it's only nine o'clock in the morning. This is what the prophet Joel announced would happen:

“In the Last Days,” God says,
“I will pour out my Spirit
on every kind of people:
Your sons will prophesy,
also your daughters;
Your young men will see visions,
your old men dream dreams.
When the time comes,
I'll pour out my Spirit
On those who serve me, men and women both,
and they'll prophesy.
I'll set wonders in the sky above
and signs on the earth below,
Blood and fire and billowing smoke,
the sun turning black and the moon blood-red,
Before the Day of the Lord arrives,
the Day tremendous and marvelous;
And whoever calls out for help
to me, God, will be saved.”

Here ends the reading. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

The truth of the matter is that nowadays in America, White Americans and Black Americans are not speaking the same language. We are, as a nation, situationally and systemically deaf: failing to hear, refusing to hear, choosing to hear what we want about racism and white supremacy.

People of Color in America are the most exposed to the virus. They are the least insured and the least protected in their places of employment from being infected by COVID-19. Their numbers are vastly over-represented in the mortality statistics still on the rise in virtually every state in this shattered union. The truth is that white, moneyed homeowners are the most protected class

there is in America. This is actually nothing new, but it has come to light on our nightly news and in the stories we read online.

The Navajo Nation is representative of the whole host of American indigenous peoples that have been decimated by sickness and lack of income, health care or government aid. According to the CDC, Navajos carry the highest known rate of coronavirus in the country, largely because of a lack of clean water supply in the Navaho Nation for hygiene and hand washing. The public taps that are often hours away from homes are tainted from uranium mining, and this injustice contributes greatly to the spread of the virus. As a result, the rate of infection in the Navajo population exceeds even that of New York City.

Today—this week—the American nation has been on fire. White Americans shake their heads and do not understand why Black Americans riot, destroy buildings and cars, loot stores, and fight in the streets. It seems so counterproductive. “Why can’t they protest politely?” we ask. I don’t pretend to understand it. And as I sit looking out the window onto my quiet little mostly-white street in my quiet little mostly-white neighborhood, I don’t have to. You see? We are complicit even when we haven’t directly *done anything wrong*. Downtown Denver enters night three of protests and lighting fires even as I write this message. A curfew was imposed last night by Mayor Hancock. This is just what we didn’t need on top of the stress and anxiety we already are

shouldering due to the silent, deadly killer virus. We are tired as a people, but the virus is not. It is just getting started and I hope you don't wistfully believe otherwise.

We are complicit when we don't care if people die-- Navajo Americans, homeless persons who aren't even counted in the infection and mortality statistics, elderly and disabled persons living in virus-infested nursing homes and impoverished persons living in unclean environments. We are complicit when Ahmaud Arbery, Deanna Taylor and George Floyd are killed in racially motivated incidents where police or former police are the perpetrators and we feel *nothing*, when we don't feel the least bit responsible, for we have our own problems and they don't have anything to do with what's going on in Georgia or Kentucky or Minnesota. Maybe that's how folks felt about us in Colorado when Columbine happened and when the Aurora Theatre massacre followed, do you suppose?

"Sure am glad I don't live there," they might have said. "That place has *problems* we just don't have!" Until it happened at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown. Until it happened at Virginia Tech University in Blacksburg and Wedgwood Baptist Church in Fort Worth and Fort Hood in Killeen and Pulse Club in Orlando and Route 91 Harvest Music Festival in Las Vegas and

Emmanuel African Methodist Church in Charleston and STEM School in Lone Tree.

Last week I attended online the 2020 Festival of Homiletics—of Preaching. I heard many sermons, but one has particularly stuck with me, a sermon written and delivered by Rev. Otis Moss III, pastor of Chicago Trinity UCC. He talked about the times we are in and offered three reminders for our daily living:

He said we must **take space and find a place for our lament**, our mourning. The “fun” of a week or two at home has expired; someday we find ourselves listless, not wanting to get dressed. We are anxious, addicted to the news, and longing for our “normal” way of life that just doesn’t exist anymore. For those out of work, unemployment insurance is soon to expire, and millions of Americans will soon be moving in with family or friends, living in their cars or in shelters or on the streets.

We miss our grandchildren. We miss eating out and going on vacation. We miss hugs and handshakes, singing aloud together on Sunday mornings and sharing the special bond that is found in our small church out in the country. We worry about our kids who are furloughed, our family members who are in need of surgeries or mental health treatment, our government that seems bent on destroying itself, our children that are lacking social integration and stimulation

and our parents who are confined to their apartments—safe, yes, but increasingly lonely.

We are the new disciples of Acts 2 after the Romans and the Pharisees have systematically purged Jerusalem of the Jesus movement. We are the ones sitting around staring at each other, shaking our heads, horrified at the news we are hearing from outside our walls of violence and riots, of unchecked abuses of power and heavy-handed policing, of senseless death and systemic racism and religious elitism. We are the ones cowering in our Upper Rooms waiting for the Savior to return and save us. “He promised he would return! We are good Christians! Where *is he* in our hour of need! We call on the Savior to save us!”

But Jesus doesn't come back. He doesn't save them. He still hasn't come back, and he will not save us from this virus or these floods and tornadoes or from our civil strife. He will not ride in this summer on a tall, white steed to make everything right in the world; this will not happen. What we *do* have of Jesus, what no one can take away from us, we have in our heads and in our hearts, words we can call on to help us to know how to love ourselves and others, passions and compassions we can draw on in times of stress and danger, injustice and oppression to help us take a step forward, just one step, just that

first step out of the relevant comfort and safety of the Upper Rooms of our own creations.

We need to lament our losses. We need to mourn for George Floyd and our black siblings who are afraid to leave their homes because they might be the unlucky next reason why cities light up in fires and riots.

We also **need to find and identify companions for our journey** through these times. Rev. Moss used the Emmaus Road story to illustrate this point. We have spent some time on that Gospel passage, in recent weeks. This time in isolation has helped us identify our true companions and friends, those who will not leave our side no matter how bad things get. Not all of them are human, by the way, but you already know that, and you are these days paying attention to eyes who have had their eyes on you all along, even as you have taken for granted their need for your companionship.

Last week, Rev. Wendy Kidd talked about the promise that a divine companion and friend has come, an Advocate, a Comforter, the Holy Spirit. Luke in his second book, the book of Acts, describes the appearance of the Spirit with these words:

Without warning there was a sound like a strong wind, gale force—no one could tell where it came from. It filled the whole building. Then, like a wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks, and they started speaking in a number of different languages as the Spirit prompted them.

Rev Al Thompson, what are the words and language that the Holy Spirit has put on your heart and tongue today?

Friday morning, I answered a call from Pastor Tracey “How are you?” she asked as so often does. Perhaps she might have been expecting “OK” or even “Fine as frog’s hair!” After a silence I replied, “I am grieving, despairing. for Minneapolis my city, my people.

I continued: “I have known some of the history of Minneapolis; the geographic neighborhood divisions: ethnic, racial, economic, social, religious; predating the movement of blacks to the city. From safe neighborhood distances away, I have known the devastation in South Minneapolis neighborhoods houses were torn down for the Interstate 35. Creating a concrete canyon which was used among others by politicians and real estate developers to make sure that minority families would not move west. I know that history of economic, social and political racisms which was replicated across our nation. I also know of the countless, nameless reunifying acts done by Minneapolitans, and by people through our great nation and our world.”

Yes, I know these things. . However, because I am privileged: racially, economically, socially, politically, judicial and I many other ways, **I know very little!**

Pastor Tracey’s intentional listening helped me move into our planning for this sermon by enabling me to give voice to my pain, my isolation, my frustration. I was called out of myself, to the task ahead speaking a word to us all this morning.

(PAUSE AL)

Pastor Tracey has given voice to our current situation, our current pain and grief, our current isolation. What are we to do?

The Holy Spirit with her powerful wind and tongues of fire, disrupted and shocked them out their Disciple's grief, and isolation. They remembered and were remembered in God's unconditional love embodied in and through Jesus. Remembering in the present moment, that Unconditional Love alive within and among them, driving them into a new future with the God's Unconditional Love alive within them.

What are we to do? What new ways have we found to member? What this new future we are already living into?

"As the United Church of Parker Hilltop, we exist because we believe that the Unconditional Love of God revealed in Jesus the Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, gives meaning and purpose to our lives"

What does this mean for us—our WHY statement-- as the cities we love burn and break and agonize and bleed? What does it take for us to take a collective breath in this country, to examine our systems of ingrained injustice and to make wholesale changes in our American values and equities that are traditionally defined by those who hold the power of money and fear and influence?

As Christians, I think Pentecost is a time for us to wake up and take on the yoke of the prophets. As told to us today by Richard Ward, Peter was compelled by the Holy Spirit to speak an uneasy truth to those gathered in the Upper Room centuries ago, an uneasy truth he speaks to us today. He proclaims:

When the time comes,
I'll pour out my Spirit
On those who serve me, men and women both,
and they'll prophesy.
I'll set wonders in the sky above
and signs on the earth below,
Blood and fire and billowing smoke,
the sun turning black and the moon blood-red,
Before the Day of the Lord arrives,
the Day tremendous and marvelous;
And whoever calls out for help
to me, God, will be saved."

Blood and fire and billowing smoke, the sun turning black and the moon blood red. Otis Moss III made this his final sermon point, holding up a picture frame as he spoke. Look at your computer screen right now. That is your picture frame; that is the limit of what you can see right now.

He said, **"We need to notice the presence of God even when God does not seem to be present."**

We need to notice the presence of God even when God does not seem to be present. Looking into the computer box or the phone box or the TV box, all we see is bad news—people being merciless to others, people dying alone and

broken, countries and states and cities and households trying to balance safety with economy, the need to eat forcing workers out of their homes and tenuously back to workplaces. Will it be safe? Will the virus take hold again? Will I make rent this next month?

Where is God in the story? Where is God in the angry tears of parents who have lost their children to violence? Where is God in the sweat-encrusted PPE equipment stuck to the skin of the overworked healthcare workers who are soon to lose their hazard pay?

Where is God when the disciples quake and vomit in the Upper Room, so scared are they to meet the same fate as their Jesus?

Pentecost tells us that the Holy Spirit is with us—we need only be aware, we need only drop the ego, we need only admit we are beyond our own ability to fix what is broken. I believe the Holy Spirit seeks us out. I believe the Holy Spirit puts thoughts of healing and empathy in our heads and hearts, moves our feet and hands, loosens our tongues, and puts us on our proverbial and sometimes literal knees in divine supplication.

This is a day like no other in the church calendar. It is our day; it is our gift from God-Alive. It is God and Jesus with us, above us, below us, in front of us and

behind us. It is the Day of the Advocate. It is the Day of the Comforter. It is the Day of the Reckoner. It is the Day of the Prophet.

It is a time like no other we have ever experienced—not all of this, not all at once, not more than we can bear, and yet, we do bear it somehow, we *do* find our spaces and places for lament. We *do* find our companions and journey with them into the vast unknown of this uncertain future. We *do* find the presence of God even when we can't find God present within our own personal picture frames. Peter tells us to speak up and speak out. Peter prophesies that a new day will come when we will see wonders in the sky and signs of God on the earth below.

Pentecost says that new day is this new day. In our sphere of influence, Spirit implores us to be God's unconditional love for someone else, especially for someone else who is not feeling the love right now. To be the Advocate for justice; to be the true safe Companion that a person of color we know needs; to be the *Christian* that Jesus wants us to be, one that gives a rip and lets it show. The Upper Room was made to be emptied; the healing Word of God was meant to be shouted out into the streets where the fires of broken dreams and promises are burning. *May It Be So.*

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