

## **Pentecost Year C 2025**

For my thirtieth birthday Katharine and I took a trip to New York City. My former roommate from college, whose birthday is the day before mine, and who lived in New York, had called and said, “we only turn thirty once, and it needs to be in New York City.” So we flew to the Big Apple to meet up with my good friend and his soon to be wife. My dad had died the year before, and I was still grieving. Under the strains of grief I was having episodes of anxiety and depression, so getting out of Dothan, Alabama and away from work seemed to promise a welcome diversion.

Tad and Christin met us at LaGuardia, and as we exited the airport and turned toward the city, the magnificent skyline in full view, Tad, fellow English major, one hand on the steering wheel, the other in a flourish, said, “Behold what humanity hath wrought!” Emerging from the Queens Mid-Town tunnel I could hear the melodic strains of Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue inside of my head; the dissonant and chaotic minor chords abruptly giving way to B-flat Major... a hymn to the ostensible triumph of this city. And what I always remember, over these past forty years is the energy.... The energy of the city... the contagious energy, palpable. You could feel it underneath the sidewalks, conductive as electricity, taking hold of the body’s rhythm, drawing one, as if in a poignant dream, into its overwhelming pace and singular stature.

I have marveled over the years as to that experience. Was it the Art Deco architecture, the urban canyons; the sheer scale, the rumbling of the subway lines; the audacity of such human ingenuity? ...No, not that... I’ve realized, it’s quite simple. It’s

the people, this melting pot of diversity, several million souls in close proximity.

Wherever people gather there is energy... we humans after all, are electro-magnetic beings. When we are together there is energy that takes hold of us, moves us, binds us in some ancient mystery, not unfamiliar. It crossed my mind then, long before I lost my mind and went off to seminary that the metaphor for God's salvation for the world, is not a return to the Garden of Eden, but the arrival at a city... the New Jerusalem, the ancient scribes and prophets call it.

Today is the Feast of Pentecost, the day we celebrate God's gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church. There are only two versions of this event in the New Testament; one in Acts, written by the author of Luke, and one in John. Neither Matthew nor Mark give an account of Pentecost. For Luke, the event takes place fifty days after the resurrection, which, of course, corresponds to the fifty days after the Jewish Passover. Pilgrims would have travelled from all parts of the region to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Weeks, marking an end to the Passover season. I imagine those pilgrims experienced the same energy in Jerusalem that I experienced in New York City, the human energy gathered for a purpose, to celebrate and express gratitude for their common life together. Energy that smacks of hope, of passion. Of possibility. I imagine the writer having this very same experience, hearing the different languages from all over the eastern Mediterranean... city folk, country folk, and everyone in between. The energy, palpable. It was as if tongues of flame had settled upon the heads of the people crowded into the streets. Yes, that's it.... Tongues of flame.

John gives a very different account. In the fourth Gospel the disciples, you remember, are gathered in a locked room, and the risen Jesus appears in their midst. This appearance is not fifty days past the day of resurrection, but on the very day of resurrection. Jesus tells them, "Receive the Holy Spirit," and he breathes on them. Unlike Luke, John is concerned with the nurture of the inner circle of the Jesus movement. Most of Jesus's teaching in John is not directed to the crowds, but to the disciples. Our reading in John for today is such a teaching on the nature and purpose of the Spirit. Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection have not yet occurred. Here he is preparing the disciples for his absence. The Holy Spirit will be their ally, he says. He calls it the Spirit of Truth; and then he uses a term that doesn't appear in any of the other Gospels. He calls the Spirit, the Advocate.... The Spirit's nature is Truth, and its means is advocacy.

So we've all heard sermons on the Holy Spirit; and they're all over the place. The Holy Spirit is like wind... it blows where it will. It's like fire, kindling our hearts for love. But we've been taught mostly about its absence; its illusiveness... that perhaps we just don't get it.; that somehow we are apart from it. The Spirit, this invisible manifestation of God, just outside of our grasp... except for those crazy Pentecostal types. We hear about its wildness, its fitful starts and stops. Back in the sixties and seventies during the so-called renewal movement, of which my mother was a part, we children in our household, wide-eyed, heard tales of people "slain in the Spirit," ...of people having

ecstatic conversion experiences. To be sure, the transforming Spirit breaks boundaries; it comes in the clothes of mystery. Some say it formed the heavens and the earth.

All of this is imaginative speculation of course; a way to speak of another dimension of reality; the very mystery of God. But today I want to offer what I think scripture says about the Spirit in the context of the Gospel accounts of the Pentecost event. So this is a composite interpretation, if you will, from the Gospels of John and Luke: The Spirit comes as naturally as breath; and the Spirit comes as the urgency of fire. The Spirit is the Truth among us, within our collective imaginations, and it calls us into a life of advocacy. It calls us into the work of the great commandment: to Love our neighbor as we love ourselves. The Spirit is set loose in empathy and sacrifice, and it is contagious, conductive.... But most important: The Spirit shows up when people gather. The Spirit is engendered by our very gathering. The Spirit at its heart is human energy, the energy of the quickened imagination: creative, visionary, passionate, like fire, like breath. In the Spirit all things are recognized as sacred. Both of the accounts of the coming of the Spirit happen at the gathering of God's people. In other words, the Spirit is not something other, but borne by flesh and blood. Our life and labor are the means of the Spirit. And it is Love that is its music. It is Love that gives it life. And the Spirit will move, and move us, until the truth is out, and falsehood is vanquished.

To live into our baptismal vocation, to be advocates for the Truth, we need the critical mass of community, a proverbial city energized by the bonds of Love. Brothers

and sisters nothing can prevail against the people of the Spirit. The Spirit changes things: Indian Independence from Britain... the fall of the Berlin wall, civil rights, women's suffrage; all brought about by the gathering and solidarity of the people, the power of the Spirit. It is always on the move among her people. The Spirit needs us, because we have the hearts for it. It is not unfamiliar to us, nor outside of us, nor apart from us. It is us.... It moves on wings of invincible hope, and brimming possibility. That: Racism will at last be conquered, because the Spirit moves in us; that our prison system will be reformed because the Spirit moves in us; that we will get meaningful gun control, and save lives because the Spirit moves in us; we will become once again a country that welcomes immigrants because the Spirit moves in us; our society will become sustainable, not just for the one percent, but that wealth will be shared where all have a measure of God's abundance, because the Spirit moves in us; there will be justice in the face of the abuse of power, and the crumbling rule of law; perhaps one day the unconscionable genocide in Gaza will stop; One day, our world will respect the dignity of every human being because the Spirit moves in us. The Spirit will move until the Truth is out.

The Spirit is strong when we are together, good people. It is the energy of life and love in faithful community.... Wherever two or three are gathered, I will be in the midst of them... so says the Spirit. Just imagine what a city could do?