

“In the Spirit of Pentecost”

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Pentecost



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Jen Norton

Readings

John 16:12-13 from the New Revised Standard Version

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.

Don't Hesitate

a poem by Mary Oliver in her book *Devotions*

If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy,
don't hesitate. Give in to it. There are plenty
of lives and whole towns destroyed or about
to be. We are not wise, and not very often
kind. And much can never be redeemed.
Still, life has some possibility left. Perhaps this
is its way of fighting back, that sometimes
something happens better than all the riches
or power in the world. It could be anything,
but very likely you will notice it in the instant
when love begins. Anyway, that's often the
case. Anyway, whatever it is, don't be afraid
of its plenty. Joy is not made to be a crumb.

Depending on where you live, or upon other variables like health and risk factors, vaccination status or personal comfort level, chances are you've begun to emerge just a bit from the exile of the last fourteen months. Here in the Bay Area we were among the earliest counties in the nation to lock down, and it's been a roller coaster ever since. These days we seem to be moving in a good direction, one where we can begin to consider holding a hybrid church service that will include virtual and physical participants. Much hard work and planning are going into these considerations, and we look forward to the next chapter in the life of our church and spiritual community.

At the risk of appearing overly dramatic, the words of Psalm 126 come to mind: *When God restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.* A people returning from exile can easily weep when brought into proximity with the life they once led. The ancient Israelites who sang this song had spent decades as refugees in Babylon. It was their longing to return home that sustained them in those difficult years. Imagine five or ten years of the life we've been living, and then think about what it would mean to return. In twenty or thirty years, whole generations would have passed, and new ones would have come along that knew nothing of the former life. This creates a challenge to the collective identity. Who are we, after all? We have had the advantage, of course, of remaining connected through technology, and though the challenge has seemed interminable at times, we've only had a little taste of what exiled peoples have experienced at many times and places throughout the history world.

The rhythm of the church calendar tells us that today is the observance of Pentecost. In other years, the celebration might take a rather raucous tone, with red flowers, balloons, and images of flaming tongues of fire signifying the coming of the Holy Spirit, who is the Fire of Life. If the Emmanuel of the nativity story is "God with us," then the "Comforter" that Jesus promised is "God in us." The arrival of either one is a cause for great joy and celebration, for it signals a welcome turning point in life as we know it. There is new energy, new life, and new creation all around us. Easter is the miracle, and Pentecost is the fuel that makes the miracle happen. This is a joyous day indeed!

If you are someone who has been safely emerging into the broader culture, you've probably experienced the joy of being in the presence of friends or family members, of dining out, of celebrating a birthday. These have been your own personal Pentecosts, these injections of energy that offer joy and elation as you become one with the "people who dream." On the night that Jesus was betrayed, he said to his friends that he had so much more to tell them. But even if they could have stayed awake long enough in the garden, those things would still have been beyond their comprehension. If we could have the answers to all of life's questions in a single day, it would simply be too much for us.

Pentecost is the day when the promised gift arrives. We may have forgotten to expect it, and when it arrives, we are reminded. When we're ready to receive it, it completes the circle. It all begins to make sense, and as it does so, it creates joy. Mary Oliver tells us that this joy was "not meant to be a crumb." In her poem entitled *Don't Hesitate*, she reminds us to drop our fear of plenty, and give in to the unbridled joy. In other words, feel it fully; embrace it; celebrate it; *be* it. It is easy to see why a people returning from exile might feel reluctant to do so. The munchkins in the land of Oz were hiding from the Wicked Witch of the East. They simply couldn't bring themselves to believe that she was no longer a threat. They had to be coaxed into their singing and dancing. As their trust increased, their guardedness decreased, and they released themselves into the joy of the moment in the imagery of a story we can all remember.

In the last year or so, I would venture to say that most of us have had at least one experience of despair. Maybe you felt that way as we began to hear that the virus had unknown variants. We had taken two steps forward, and then what felt like ten steps back. But here we are. Nothing is one hundred percent, but we're gaining ground, and the day is dawning when we can come out from behind our walls and feel the fresh air on our faces. As the Psalmist sang:

*When God restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
"God has done great things for them."
God has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.
Restore our fortunes,
like streams in the desert.
May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.
Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves with them.*

Maybe you've heard the old-time hymn entitled *Bringing In the Sheaves*, wondering what on earth it was about. Who knew that Mary Oliver would be the one to elucidate it, and tell us that "sometimes something happens better than all the riches or power in the world." "Whatever it is," she says, "don't be afraid of its plenty." In the twenty-first century we might say it this way: "Party like you mean it!"

As has been often the case in the life of the church, Pentecost has taken on a heady, doctrinal, theological meaning, another opportunity to systematically explain the Third Person of the Trinity. Well, I don't think that Person needs any explanation at all. It is the longing of Sacred Holy Spirit that we have an experience of it, that we feel empowered and energized by it, that we bask in the warmth of it, that we lose ourselves in its elation. It is the longing of Sacred Holy Spirit that we awaken to this new energy, that we rise up from the ashes of difficult times and create a new world where oppression has no place, where the hungry are fed, and where every person is revered as the dwelling place of the Divine. Pentecost, you see, is our very own resurrection day, for it reminds us that rising up was not just meant for Jesus, but for us all.

This is the completion of the yearly story that began in the darkness of Advent's womb, emerged in the delivery of hope for all of humankind, a hope that was betrayed, arrested, tried without cause, and sentenced to death; a hope that no tomb could contain. Nothing could keep it from rising up, and such news brings nothing but unbridled joy, because now we have it all. We have everything we need, every resource, every piece of wisdom, every experience of healing, and yes, it may be far too much to comprehend, but as we move into it one day at a time, we will live it together!