

“What Do We Do Now?”

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Pentecost 2



Crossroads #4
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Readings

From *Freeing Jesus*

by Diana Butler Bass

As millions have discovered in these many months, Jesus was not confined to a building. Jesus was around our tables at home, with us on walks and hikes, present in music, art, and books, and visible in faces via Zoom. Jesus was with us when we felt we could do no more, overwhelmed by work and online school. Jesus was with us as we prayed with the sick in the hospital over cell phones. Jesus did not leave us to suffer alone. COVID-19 forced Jesus out of the cathedral and into the world, reminding Christians that church is not a building. Rather, church is wherever two or three are gathered—even if the “two” is only you and your cat—and where Jesus is present in bread that regular people bake, bless, and break at family tables and homemade altars. We did not liberate Jesus from the cathedral; a pandemic did. Jesus is with us. Here.

Matthew 28:20

from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

“Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have taught you. I’ll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age.”

What do we do now? It’s a question we might ask in any pivotal moment of life. A task gets completed; a milestone is reached; a new year arrives, or a new week, or even a new day, and we wonder, in the vast array of choices before us, what should we do now? In the opening paragraph of the Acts of the Apostles, Luke the Physician gives us the story of the ascension: a resurrected Jesus on the Mount of Olives, turning his disciples into apostles. No longer would they simply be

followers. They would become literally the “sent ones,” those with a specific task to perform, the task being simply to tell the world what they had seen and heard. Luke says that this is when “a cloud” took Jesus from their sight, leaving them standing on the hillside looking at each other in a way that said, “What do we do now?” Their first assignment was the hardest one: to wait within their liminal space until the time was right. And they did it. And when the Spirit came upon them at Pentecost, Peter, the most impetuous and mouthy of the disciples, often the prisoner of his own naivete, stood up among them with confidence, power, and eloquence, and told the world around him the story of what he had experienced. Without a printing press or an online platform, he raised his voice and spoke out loud. And say what you will about the limitations of primitive methods of communication, it’s been two thousand years and we’re still talking about it. We are still charged with the same task: to tell the world what we’ve seen and heard, to bear witness to the healing power of love, and to envision a world where we treat one another as we wish to be treated, to love our neighbors as ourselves, the essence of religion itself.

We have spent the last fifteen months in our own liminal space, doing the hardest thing there is to do, to wait. We’ve been waiting to travel, waiting to embrace, waiting to celebrate, waiting to dine, waiting to sing, waiting to worship, waiting, waiting, waiting. . . And now it appears we will experience the empowerment of our own Pentecost, that what has long been promised, sought, and planned for can actually happen in some way. The Spirit came in power, we are told, as they were “together in one place.” In our new Pentecost, our empowerment will also come as we are gathered in one place, the difference being that our “one place” includes a physical and a virtual component. Our gathered space will now be a hybrid one. This is not an optional piece of church life in the COVID world. Every fellow minister I speak with, every church website I visit, every denominational outlet or publication is saying exactly the same thing. The very existence of the church rests upon our ability to adapt to these exciting and interesting changes.

I say that they are exciting and interesting because they are. If we’re looking for them to be comfortable and easy, we will probably be disappointed. Think of us as pioneers heading west in a covered wagon, at times creating the path as we go along, coming up against obstacles and navigating them in ways that feel creative, hopeful, and effective. The best preparation for this journey is to take with us what we’ve learned over the last year. Church historian Diana Butler Bass has a brand new book that she’s written during the pandemic, called *Freeing Jesus*. For the theologically minded, the title seems provocative, but it isn’t really. It’s a retrospective of the many “Jesuses” she has known in her life, “Jesus” being her metaphor for the container of her belief and practice. “Jesus” is her spiritual path. You may have a different metaphor or a different name for it in your life. I certainly do. Whatever the metaphor, Diana’s observation is that the pandemic offered us an unparalleled opportunity to sift and sort, and to let go of all preconceptions that the Divine dwells in a cathedral or in a church. We’ve always known intellectually that “church” is not a building. The pandemic took that theoretical idea and turned it into our experience. Diana says that where “two or three are gathered” might now refer to you and your cat.

When else in history have we taken the time to consider Divine Presence as expressed in our felines and canines? When else has “going to church” meant sitting at a table with a computer? When else have we had the opportunity to redefine the very concept of “gathering,” to stop lamenting the dwindling attendance figures within our bricks and mortar, and to start looking at the vast ocean of folks, some of whom might long for a spiritual home that is not necessarily available to them locally? When Jesus told the apostles, “Go into all the world” and tell them what happened, who knew that in the 21st century, this might mean literally going to the whole world?

In the last twenty years, preachers, historians, seers, and thought leaders have been telling us that the church is poised for a New Reformation, that our old ways of “doing and being” are falling away, and that the very demise of the Christianity we have known is making the fertile ground from which the next expression of Divine and Holy Spirit will spring forth. I believe that this is the pivotal moment in this New Reformation, a dawning of unparalleled change for our church, for the wider church, and for humankind. As we begin the rather delicate process of regathering, what sifting and sorting are we doing? What remains of our former selves? What can be let go of? What new life can be created?

If there is a vision for ministry in the next twenty-five or fifty years, it will be one in which the preservation of old forms and structures will have given way to the joy of discovery and exploration. It will be a recognition that every flower of the past that falls to the ground will carry a seed of the future. It will be an opening of our hearts to the generations who come after us, whose names we will not know, whose faces we might not recognize. They won’t be doing things our way. They will have far different priorities. They may not remain in our building or observe our traditions. They will be the apostles of their own generations, telling their stories and sharing their experiences of Divine Essence. They may not call it God. Jesus may be one among many of their teachers. Their language will be love, and their shared wisdom will become our legacy, but only if we can ask ourselves the question, “What do we do now?” The way forward is not in the answer, but in the question.

