

“God’s Fantasy”

Rev. David Gregory

June 5, 2022

Pentecost

Readings

Acts 2: 17-18

from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

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.



The Pentecost, detail
Juan Bautista Maino

Imagine”

a poem by Lynn Ungar in *These Days: Poetry of the Pandemic Age*

Imagine with me for a moment—
don’t worry, I’m not saying it’s real.
Imagine, if you can, that there has been
not a calamity, but a great awakening.

Pretend, just for a moment,
that we all so loved our threatened earth
that we stopped going on cruises,
limited international flights,
worked on cherishing the places
where we already are.

In this pretty fantasy, everyone who possibly can
stops commuting. Spends the extra time
with their kids or pets or garden.
We have the revelation that everyone
needs health care, sick leave, steady work.

It occurs to us that health care workers
are heroes. Also teachers. And scientists.
Not to mention the artists of all kinds
who teach us resilience and joy.

Imagine, if you will,
that we turned to our neighbors
in mutual aid, trading eggs for milk,
checking in on those who are elderly
or alone. Imagine if each of us
felt suddenly called to wonder
“In this moment, what does the world
Need from me? What are my gifts?”
Yes, I know it’s just a fantasy.
The world could never change
so radically overnight.
But imagine.

It was a strange realization recently—perhaps because my mind has been occupied with many other things—but it occurred to me as we entered the month of June, that it has been a full forty years since my graduation from seminary and the beginning of my first position as a Christian minister. That is not to say that this is the only thing that has defined me. In the last forty years I have lived a lot of life, which has alternately found me in concert or in contrast with this work we call vocational ministry.

Like most people who entered this work as young as I did—I was 25, mind you—I was possessed by a certain idealism, that somehow having studied non-stop for seven years in the field of theology, having been taught to stand in front of people and say something meaningful about that theology, and by having the title “Reverend” in front of my name, I actually knew something or had found some certainties that I could grasp and present to others. In my particular case, I was also locked into a persona that did not represent who I really was. So, fifteen years into this journey, the entire paradigm shifted—out of necessity—at first just for survival, and later with a deepening sense of purpose, of my life’s mission, having experienced enough of it to begin to find meaning for myself in this journey of faith, and to hopefully bring some of that meaning to others in a more authentic way. I have no idea how I might have spoken about Pentecost in 1982. At this stage, I’m certain I’d not be able to sit through whatever I would have said, nor would you. I am no longer the same person, and this is not the same world, or the same church. And that’s all ok. We were never meant to stay where we began.

This co-creative force that we call Holy Spirit is simultaneously pushing and pulling us forward into something new, something remarkable, “edgy” even. It’s the green growing edge that’s demonstrated in everything we see around us: the rings of a tree trunk, the hatching of baby birds, the flowers that produce the fruit, the butterflies that break free from their cocoons. And so now fifty days from Easter we enter Pentecost, the true culmination of the story. If we think of Resurrection as the final chapter, then we’ve missed the entire story. It’s like putting the novel down with the final chapter unread. We would never do that, and we would never want to.

The Book of Acts in the New Testament is the sequel to the Gospel of Luke, and together the two books form a panoramic story that begins in the womb of a young Jewish woman and ends with the early followers of Jesus spreading the seeds of “good news” to the far reaches of the Roman empire. In the language of Luke the Physician, rich with detail and metaphor, we get a sense of how this thing we call “church” came to exist in the first place. Luke’s language does not envision what the church became, starting with the third and fourth centuries, but its central feature—the happenings around the Feast of Pentecost—gives us an idea of the radical nature of church in its nascent form.

As I’ve said many times before, I do not believe that Jesus of Nazareth set out with any intention of forming a new world religion. He was born Jewish, lived his entire thirty-three years as a Jew, and he died fully and unequivocally Jewish. Almost all of his early followers were Jewish. But something incredible happened at this Feast of Pentecost, the first Jewish festival to happen after the crucifixion. As thousands made their pilgrimage to Jerusalem, it was a gathering like no other. The whole scene was like a lump of dough without any leavening agent, and then came this realization in the words of the Hebrew Prophet Joel, that God was pouring out this thing they called “Spirit” on “all flesh.” As exclusive followers of Yahweh, it was difficult for Jesus’s followers to think that somehow the entire human race was now included in this energy, and that this “rushing mighty wind” and the appearance of flames over their heads wasn’t limited to a small subset of humanity, but open and available to all. And to emphasize that point, these pilgrims from everywhere heard all of this happening in their own languages. And if they didn’t believe it then, thirty years later when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem, persecutions drove them to their green growing edge, and as the Apostle

Paul put it, there was no distinction between Jew or gentile, male or female, slave or free. Everyone was equal in the energy of Spirit. It turned out that even God wasn't Jew or gentile, male or female, and as we noted last week, this mystical Oneness of all things was at the core of what this young rabbi was talking about in the first place.

Later, as this new entity called *ecclesia* or "church" was hijacked by the Empire, it began to take on its exclusionary tone. *But at the beginning it was not so.* The early followers of Jesus were both male and female, but the stories of the females were expunged or relegated to the tangential. And yet the prophet Joel had said that women *and* men would prophesy. There would be plenty of dreaming.

This Holy Spirit would be uncontrollable, like the wind that it is. It would interrupt the walls and structures built against it. It would resist all attempts to categorize it, to put it into some file folder locked away somewhere by a priesthood purporting to have the only key. The Protestant reformation of the sixteenth century was proof that that particular lid would be blown off, driven by the new technology of the printing press until five hundred years later (oh wait, that's now!) when that earlier reformation had grown stale and stodgy, and a new burst of energy driven by new technology would propel us forward once again into our newest green growing edge. Pentecost is about radical change. The Holy Spirit is never incremental. It never waits for us to catch up. As Jesus told Nicodemus, "The wind blows where it will. You do not know where it comes from or where it's going. This is how it is to be born of Spirit."

It may seem strange that on the ultimate Christian holiday I would go to our Unitarian/Universalist friend, Lynn Ungar, to describe something that many Christians think they solely own. We've been here before with her book *These Days: Poetry of the Pandemic Age*. We've invited her work into our midst over the last couple of years to help us create context and meaning in the COVID world. And it has helped us to understand that, yes, the world does change radically. Things as they are are not necessarily as they shall be. And if you doubt that things can change, here is what she says:

Imagine, if you will,
that we turned to our neighbors
in mutual aid, trading eggs for milk,
checking in on those who are elderly
or alone. Imagine if each of us
felt suddenly called to wonder
"In this moment, what does the world
Need from me? What are my gifts?"
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The result of Pentecost was that a mixed-up kid named Simon Peter stood up and delivered a powerful message that changed the course of life for those who heard him. Everyone shared in common, everyone was fed, everyone was included.

If you harbor fantasies of the world changing overnight, then Pentecost is your holiday! And if you think that these dreams do not really happen, then you need to read the final chapter. Its title is *Imagine*.