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Pentecost

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What most of us know about Pentecost comes from its founding story in the second chapter of the book of Acts. As described there, it is a spectacular, if somewhat chaotic, event replete with tongues of flame and the sound of rushing wind. The Holy Spirit descends on the apostles, and they begin testifying in languages other than their own. This draws a crowd of Jewish pilgrims, and now each of them is hearing about God's "deeds of power" in his or her own language. This is a wonder.

But let's not go there. There is a prequel to all this excitement and it's found in the Jesus's farewell discourse, covering nearly four chapters in the Gospel of John. There we discover that Pentecost does not begin in excitement but in loneliness. And before it is miraculous testimony, it is a promise given in the dark.

It's a quieter, more subdued scene. Jesus is presiding over his last meal with his disciples. The air is heavy with a sense of doom. He has just given the morsel to Judas, identifying him as the one who will betray him, and Judas has bolted from the room to be swallowed by the night. Inside, imagine Jesus seated at the head of the table, his face illumined by candlelight. He is speaking to his friends with great solemnity and at some length. It is his Long Goodbye. Tomorrow he must die, and his friends will be alone.

But before he leaves, he has one parting gift for them. Under the door of their grief and anxiety, he slides a gift only he could give. "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. I will not leave you desolate...."

What the Savior gives is a promise.

A promise can be given at any time. Say your mother is ill, old, and worried. She is feeling alone. "What will become

of me?" she asks. It falls to you to say, "Mom, we will always care for you, no matter what. I promise you." The child is afraid of the dark. And why shouldn't she be? There's a monster living under her bed. It falls to you to say, "There is not a monster under your bed. I promise you."

This is not the same as saying about a young artist, "She shows great promise." That means we already see the signs of greatness about her. No, the promises we need occurs in the dark, in the absence of signs or evidences of success. In these situations, the promise is everything. There are no other grab bars, no plan Bs. The promise is only as good as the one who makes it.

Our life in this church is rich with both kinds of promise. There are detectable signs of the Holy Spirit among us. How could we say otherwise as we gather this morning to sing together, to pray for ourselves and the world, and to be nourished by the bread of heaven. But "church" also happens where the indicators are not so hopeful.

A few years back in the Diocese of Pittsburgh, a recently ordained priest was to initiate a ministry to the poorer and working class of their neighborhood on the east end of town. How to begin? A feasibility study? An advertising blitz? Here's what he did: he took a card table, a hand-woven blanket, and some bread and a cruet of wine to the local laundromat, and there he set up shop. Within weeks, Pentecost happens and a congregation materializes. Soon the patrons are crossing themselves and waiting for a break in the service to switch their clothing from washers to drying. The "Laundromat Priest," as he is known, intones the Great Thanksgiving during the spin cycle. I remember us gathering with him at diocesan convention – we all had questions: do you have an office? A budget? Surely you have a stewardship committee to help you get things off the ground. What do you do all week anyways? I just hang out in the laundromat and use the offering from Sunday to help people get clean clothes for the week.

About this church you could say it doesn't have much

promise. On the other hand, all it has is the promise (and it has proved to be more than enough): “I will not leave you desolate.”

The whole world needs the promise of Pentecost, because desolation is everywhere. I read a couple of years back the British government appointed a cabinet level official to tackle the epidemic of loneliness in Great Britain. The Minister of Loneliness. Look at all the lonely people, another Brit sang, where do they all come from? First, we think of the elderly, but loneliness has many faces: the bullied, the closeted, the housebound, those with failing memories, the grieving, the incarcerated, and of course, the different, who often find themselves alone in the crowd.

In our great cities millions of people live what Thoreau called “lives of quiet desperation.” In New York City, an enterprising fellow has created a network of lonely strangers, now numbering in the thousands, who gather virtually on a weekly basis—to do what? To talk to one another. It is an intervention desperately needed. What were once inter-human transactions are routinely conducted impersonally between and among invisible strangers. Online banking, online education, online shopping—all such transactions have one thing in common: no one will occupy your life-space to smile at you and say, “It’s good to be with you again. How’ve you been?”

Imagine if it were possible to go online and confess your sins and receive absolution. It works like this: first, select the appropriate sin from a drop-down menu of sins, then, after a few intermediate steps, click on Forgiveness, and you’re done. No altar, no candles, no passing the peace, no off-key singing, no crying babies, no cold coffee in the narthex. Nothing of what we once meant by “community.” Only you. The miracle is that your heart can select the proper response and be forgiven this way. But it is a lonelier way to go.

In the darkness of his room, which is known to us as the Upper Room, Jesus has a vision of the profound loneliness on this our lonely planet. And so, he makes a promise that

goes something like this: “I will send a Helper to cut through the occlusions and scar tissue of your world. I will make a way out of no way. I will send you a Helper who will open a channel through the loneliness of this life. He will make me available to you.”

The many translations of that one little word, “helper”—Paraclete—that is, one who is called to the side of another, show how hard it is to define the Holy Spirit: advocate, helper, comforter, counselor, Spirit of Truth. Strange for a preacher to say, but it’s hard to talk about the Holy Spirit because when it comes to divine things, we are all children, and children need pictures. But there are none. No pictures, only effects. Because of this, for many Christians the Holy Spirit remains the Unknown God.

The most common misconception of the Holy Spirit is that the Spirit’s purpose is to give us more of us. As if the Spirit’s job is to give me more of me, much in the way a five-hour energy drink provides a boost: Is your church small? The Spirit will make it big. Are you having trouble paying your bills? The Spirit will make you rich beyond your wildest dreams! Do you sometimes feel like a loser? Is the whole cosmos kicking sand in your face? The Spirit will make you a winner. Do you sometimes struggle in your faith, even entertain a doubt or two? The Spirit will erase your bad mind and fill you with boundless enthusiasm.

To be fair, toward the end of his letter to the Galatians, Paul does list some human behaviors that he associates with the Holy Spirit. But they aren’t the muscular claims we hear so much about. They are accurate reflections of God’s presence in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control.

Further, in writing to the Corinthians, Paul claims that no one can speak this three-word sentence apart from the Holy Spirit: “Jesus is Lord.” Which means that we can’t even share a word about Jesus or recite the Apostles’ Creed without the Spirit’s help. If this is true, how much more, then, is the Spirit needed outside the walls of the sanctuary? Who but the

Holy Spirit is helping those who are trying to follow Jesus in supposedly “secular” venues—in cancer wards, classrooms, courtrooms, kitchens, shelters, jails, war zones, and refugee camps around the world?

The Greek word for “desolate” is orphanos—from which we derive the English word “orphaned.” I will not leave you orphaned. This word came alive for me as I’ve been rereading one of Anne Lamont’s early books, *Traveling Mercies*. Anne became a Christian, a church person, after a very difficult life of drug and alcohol addiction, disastrous personal relationships, essentially because she discovered, through a remarkable little church, that God loved her, regardless of what she had done. Lamont remembers a friend’s experience with a Catholic adoption agency for special children. Inquiring prospective parents are given a questionnaire:

Could you adopt:

An addicted baby?

A terminally ill baby?

A downs’ baby?

A baby with a tendency towards violence?

Well, God is an adoptive parent, Lamont proposes. God says, ‘Sure, I’ll take the kids who are addicted or terminal. I’ll pick all the messed up kids, and of course, the sadists, the selfish ones, the liars . . . So of course,’ Lamont said, “God loves old ordinary me, even or especially at my most scared and petty and mean and obsessive. Loves me: chooses me.” God hasn’t left me orphaned.

I’m not sure what brought you here this morning. Maybe you were just driving by, and decided you’d poke your head in, maybe give this faith thing another go; maybe your spouse dragged you along with them since its Pentecost and all; maybe you were bribed or begged; maybe you don’t know why you are here. Nor do I know the darkness you may have brought with you; the darkness in your family’s life; you are worried about your marriage, or the uncertainty

of this next chapter in your life, or your aging parents. I don't know the worry, the division, the grief you might be carrying. I don't know what wakes you up in the night. I don't know how long you've been in that dark room. If there is anyone sharing it with you, holding a light for you as you stumble along. Well, call it chance, or fate, or the Holy Spirit, you are here. The community gathered doesn't pretend to have all the answers, to have it all right. What we are trying to do is to be a community that lives less by certainties, and more by promises. And this morning we are met by one of those promises, as the Savior looks at each of us full of love and tenderness says:

“I will never leave you desolate.”

