

Spirits Afire, Tongues Aflame

Pentecost, Year A, 5/28/23

In whatever language, in whatever tongue, the message remains the same: though I am leaving, peace I leave with you. Wait for that peace, and when it comes, share it, cherish it, and preserve it. It may come again, it will come again – but never again quite like this. Your hearts, your tongues, your spirits will burn, but they will not be consumed. The fires We light in them today while shine forth Our power into all the world – so long as you go forth and shine it there. We have chosen – God, that is – We have chosen to do it this way. You shall be Our ears and hearts and tongues and hands, showing all who live what We can do, and that you all can look upon the God who is Love and live, in peace and for it, now and evermore. Wait for it – wait for it, and wait together. However many of you there are, wait in peace. Wait as one.

So they did. They waited. Jesus had told his people to gather, so they gathered. He had told them that the Spirit would come upon them and teach them, so they waited for it, and it did. Then they went forth and changed the world.

He had told them, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you” (John 14:26). He’d said it before. They’d heard it before. Even if that were all he left them, it would’ve been enough.

They gathered. They waited. The day was the Feast of Shavuot, the Harvest Festival of the Spring Barley, fifty days after the Passover – hence, in Greek, “Pentecost,” which means fiftieth. While they waited, the Spirit came – not as a still, small voice but as the “rush of a violent wind” (Acts 2:2), with tongues of fire appearing over their heads, and one resting on each of them. Soon they heard languages coming

from their mouths that they did not know they knew, but that others in the city knew by heart, their mother tongues.

Thus did God undo, without quite saying so, what They had done at Babel, dividing humanity into separate tongues precisely so they could not work together. What had they been working together to do? Build a great big tower to avoid a second flood sent to wipe out all the world, just in case the Promise of the Rainbow turned out to be untrue. Yet, since God had given Noah that rainbow sign – ‘not by water; the fire next time’ – the people building that tower built it of stone, the better to resist the burning, too. God was not pleased, not pleased at all. ‘In your pride, would you reject Our judgments, or seek to avoid them?’ God asked them – rhetorically, as it turned it, for God then told them, ‘This cannot be.’ And, lo, it was not, and the people were divided from one another, by the very tongues in their mouths and the sounds they made to speak by, that others might hear.

Thus entered into myth the idea that diversity, or at least difference, was given to us as a curse and an impediment, which may have been how our forebears experienced it. For all that their laws would have them treat the stranger well, and even hallow them, these people did become an insular lot, suspicious of outsiders and not keen to have them come in, as it were. Even Jesus, born to them as one of them, had some work to do to get used to the idea that the salvation and freedom he was bringing were for everyone, no matter where they were or who, or what words they used for ‘father’, ‘mother’, ‘chair’, ‘rain’, or ‘God’. Our ears hurt when we hear Jesus’s insults to the woman in Samaria, who turns his metaphor for her people – ‘dogs’ – back on him, but rest easier when he praises her faith, even if he never quite says ‘sorry’. And she spoke his language, don’t forget; nothing lost in translation in that scene. He meant what he said, and so did she. They understood each other very well. They just did not agree, at first, on who mattered.

Jesus, that is, like so many of us, had to overcome his own internalized racism and privilege, even as his own people were the victims' of others prejudices and aspersions. He had to learn to cast the beam out of his own eye before trying to cast out the mote from someone else's, much less teach others to do so. He had to learn when to speak, and how, and when to refrain from speaking. He had to learn to listen, and then let what he listened to change him, if it should, as in the story of the woman in Samaria he does, for the most part. As it was with the Father, so it was with the Son. Each, the Bible shows us even if not always saying so, had much to learn.

Be that as it may, by the time his earthly sojourn ends, Jesus is in the gear of full inclusion mode, fast-tracking salvation and its promise so no-one misses out. He sends those whom he has taught, and now enflamed, out to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth to baptize, teach, and set people free in his name, in God's name, and in the name of all that is holy. The tongues of fire at Pentecost help those disciples learn how – speak to people in words they understand – at the very same time it shows them that they can.

Let us remind ourselves in more detail of the three lessons of Pentecost:

Lesson #1: The Spirit's lessons come fast.

Lesson #2: The Spirit's lessons surprise.

Lesson #3: The Spirit's lessons meet many needs.

Jesus did not, exactly, prepare them for tongues of fire or spirits of flame. John tried – 'I baptize you with water; he with the Holy Spirit and with fire', but no-one quite understood it at the time. Baptize with spirits one can at least grasp as an image, though questions remain: must these spirits be clear, like tequila or gin, or can we use tawny, barrel-aged brandies and whiskies? I'm only half-joking, mind you; it does

say, in the Bible, that these people looked and sounded three sheets to the wind by the time they went out a-spiriting to all Jerusalem. Add fire to the mix, though, and it sounds, well, quite like the Rainbow Sign: ‘not by water; the fire next time.’” Be that spirit Holy, heaven knows how hot or bright it will burn.

Burn us, that is, or at least in us. ‘Did not our hearts burn within us when he spoke to us on the road’ aske the disciples at Emmaus, after Jesus spoke, broke the bread, and left. ‘Did not our hearts burn?’

As the great hymn says, ‘Come, Holy Ghost, our souls to inspire, and light in us celestial fire...’.

In a children’s key, ‘Star light, star bright. First star I see tonight. I wish I may, I wish I might...’.

Or is it, as was sung in my youth, “Starlight, star bright. First star I see tonight. Starlight, star bright. Make everything alright.”?¹

If it be of God, it will. Make everything alright, that is. When they were touched by those tongues of fire for the first and, as far as we know, very last time, it must’ve come as a surprise. Jesus had told them that the Spirit was coming, but not how. When their mouths shouted forth God’s praise in words they had never known or even imagined, and people understood them, that must’ve been a surprise, too. He said they’d receive power, and be his witnesses to all Jerusalem and beyond, and if these be the means, so be they. He said they’d speak the truth, which is also good news, for powerful speech that has not the truth in it can do more damage than we can imagine. Why was that not the Curse of Babel, to make people be unable to tell truth from lies, or set them to serve leaders who did nothing but lie to them? Perhaps that was too awful even for an angry God to do to people, as we see in the lives of

¹ Madonna Ciccone, “Lucky Star,” *Madonna*. Album. © 1983.

the victims of the Putin or Trump regimes, or those of Stalin or Hitler. It's a truth in any language that liars do evil, and evil depends on lies, for which reason our Chief Deceiver and great Enemy has ever been known as the Father of Lies.

But tongues of flame do not lie. The power of their star-fire is to make sure that people can hear the truth and have the freedom and grace to listen to it. That's not always easy to do. People tend not to want to hear unpleasant truths, much as they may resist learning new ways of speaking or thinking about things, but truth has a funny way of making itself clear. It's easier to let the Spirit do it – through us, if needs be, but not simply up to us. The Spirit gave Jesus's disciples words, and opened their and others' ears, so that each might speak, and all might hear, what God was doing among them, and how, and why. Why? To prepare them for what they had to do, and what they had to say, in a world that would not always listen, and in which they would still know doubt and loss and fear, but beyond that, peace, even when they did not understand it. Especially then.

In the story of that first Pentecost I hear both relief and challenge. As we gather in relative peace and safety and, comparatively speaking, abundance, free to be who we are amidst a community that cherishes this freedom, we remember and mourn those who have it not, or who have had it taken from them. We mourn those who have died before their time, whether from disease, accident, malice, poverty, or war, by violence intended or violence unleashed, or while fleeing to find a new home at least half as safe as ours. We lament those who suffer from what a changed climate is leaving to sink, rot, or burn, or from politics and economies that hoard wealth and spread misery. Peace he gave us, and peace he gives us, and yet pain remains amidst joy, as shadows remain on a cloudless day at noon. That, too, is part of the Pentecost reminder and story. Every year, spirits fire and tongues flame, in a world that needs

such spirits and tongues each year and every, now as much as then, and next year perhaps even more.

That is an important lesson in Pentecost, at least for me, and for all the tongues in which, and all the ears to which, “Peace” is spoken. That range and its beauty, the power it shows of all that we are as human beings, in our differences and uniqueness, were all on full display that morning and on this. Yet in the midst of that diversity they each heard clearly, in a language they knew, and heard it with precision. The many tongues speaking in the power of God that day meant that when any disciple spoke aloud the name of Jesus and the power of the risen Christ, each person who had come to Jerusalem for Pentecost, for Shavuot, would hear it in their own tongue. They would hear in words they could understand words of the Word that was before all worlds, as well as the words from the prophet Joel that now all the people would prophesy, the young see visions, and the old dream dreams. They heard in their own tongues of God’s deeds of power – and heard them by means of a deed of power, the Spirit’s gift of tongues afire and spirits aflame with the power and love of God for a world sorely in need of both. They heard the truth: what God had done and keeps doing to mend lives and heal the world. *Amen.*