

“Make a Little Birdhouse in Your Soul”

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Pentecost Sunday

There is a sign of life I have been noticing in the past week or so: tiny, fragile eggshells— white ones, blue ones, speckled ones, these protective casings have finished with their purpose and have hatched new life. I love it that I am noticing these shells as the church heads into the season of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the church, because one of the church’s signs for the Holy Spirit is a dove. So these shells remind me that the Spirit is breaking open, alive and upon us.

I’m not exactly sure why the bible links the Holy Spirit with a dove; though we see the Spirit’s presence in the Old Testament, it’s in the New Testament— all four gospels— that we see reports at Jesus’ baptism, that “lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him.” In the Hebrew Bible, a dove bearing an olive branch is a sign to Noah and all those who filled the Ark that the flood was over, and that they could start the world over again on dry land. Also in the Hebrew Bible, remember the prophet Jonah— who got eaten by a fish because he fled from God’s call to prophesy to Nineveh, the infamous enemies of Israel? Well, his name, Jonah, in Hebrew means *dove*; and, even though he flew away, he ended up doing the right thing: turning back and preaching to Nineveh— and they heard his word and totally changed their ways, and then God forgave them and embraced them. The story is a sign that God’s favor is not meant for just one people and one nation, but it is offered for the world. It took a prophet named for a dove to bring us that story.

But we don’t get a dove in today’s lectionary story from Acts. Instead, we get the rush of wind. We get divided tongues of fire. We hear speaking in languages, every language known, but these aren’t foreign; it’s all understood. What could all this mean?

Pentecost should call us to start the world again, as the dove bearing the dry olive branch did for Noah and his passengers. I can only imagine how lost the followers of Christ felt after Jesus’ ascension. Did they think, “Wow, Jesus, that’s great that you get to be swept up into the heavens... but what about the rest of us?” Jesus— while he was among them— always promised he would send an Advocate to help them, but his followers— like you and me— had a hard time understanding if it wasn’t concrete. I mean, Jesus told them at *least* a dozen times that he would die and be raised, and yet they were a combo of confused/shocked/in denial/resistant when that very thing actually happened. But Jesus promised an Advocate, and that’s what the people got. Then, it was their turn to start the whole thing over again: to love, to welcome, to heal, and to share some good news, but this time, instead of Jesus walking before them leading the way, *they would become* the body of Christ.

Pentecost gives us a glimpse of what the world could look like. The scriptures describe a gathering of people of every nation. Now, of course we know it wasn’t literally every nation, but the nations of the Jewish diaspora— the ones that knew to send people back to Jerusalem to

commemorate the 50th day after the Passover. But the scripture says *every nation under heaven* and I think that is not simply an example of someone with a small worldview who thinks the world reaches only as far as where the sons and daughters of Abraham have traveled. The writer of Luke-Acts wants us to see that God makes the Holy Spirit available to every single person ever born. Young, old, slave, free, straight, queer, every race, every gender, every language. Like Jonah, the dove-prophet, we are invited to extend the story of God's love far beyond the boundaries of what is familiar to us.

Pentecost should remind us to save a space in our souls for something holy to happen. I love a song by the 1990's band They Might Be Giants, called "Make a Little Birdhouse in Your Soul." I understand the song is actually an ode to a child's glowing bird nightlight, but today I would like to stretch that metaphor to encourage us to make a home inside our hearts for the Holy Spirit to land, just as she did so long ago.

On that day of Pentecost, weird things happened. For example, people started speaking in tongues. Now, I know you won't commonly find such an experience in a Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. That doesn't mean Christians don't experience it this way, and in fact I have spoken to church members in our congregation who experienced speaking in tongues in their Presbyterian congregations in other countries. I've never had that experience and don't expect to, nor do I understand it; but I don't belittle it. With age I have grown to accept the mysteries of how the Spirit works in different people.

As for me, I celebrate the subtler ways I see the Spirit's many tongues. Last week I told you about how chaperoning the fourth grade field day brought me some restoration and hope after several days of paralyzing despair over yet another school shooting. I was turning that day with the fourth graders over and over in my head, drawing hope from it, when I realized there was more to the story, and the Holy Spirit was part of it. At the close of field day, the kids celebrated with ice-pops which I helped the teachers pass out. After they finished their pops with a slurp, they proudly displayed their tongues to one another— each one, stained in red, orange, purple, or blue. As I remembered and savored that day in my mind, I saw it: Flav-Or-Ice turned to fiery tongues; the Spirit was upon them! And it brings me hope to think that these children— whose families come from every nation— will grow to use their spirited tongues to speak, to sing, to yell. And *we will listen* to what they have to say to us, because each new generation reveals more understanding of who the Spirit is, and what she is asking of us.

The truth is, miracles like the Fourth Grade Flav-Or-Ice Pentecost are all around us. We walk by them every day, but fail to notice them. That is because we have not made room in our souls for the holy to enter. But when we make space for the Spirit, we will see that she is constantly trying to woo us with glimpses of goodness, grace, and beauty. When we receive those, then the Spirit strengthens us to respond with faith, courage, and justice— to do the harder work of making the dreams and visions the Spirit gives us for the world as God sees us a reality. If we swoon with delight to the Spirit's gifts, but we do not allow them to change us, then we are missing the full experience of the Spirit. Like Jonah, who was sent by the Spirit somewhere he did **not** want to go— that is, to the people of Nineveh, whom he considered so awful that they did

not *deserve* God— sometimes receiving the Spirit will challenge and provoke us beyond our shelters and bring us to new understandings. We let old assumptions and prejudices die, as we are brought to new life in Christ.

It's not always easy. One bit of the Pentecost story that stands out to me is that when the people heard those gathered speaking in tongues, each understood in their own native language. And this confused them. "All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'" Presented with the miracle of understanding— which these days, seems so hard to come by, since people act the *opposite* of understanding. In Acts, these understanding people were *confused* by their understanding. To me that speaks to this day— ah!-- how we have come to expect division, disagreement, misunderstanding. Even if we were to find ourselves in harmony and agreement, we may not even accept it because we are so coiled to react to *mis*understanding.

And for some, that confusion contorted its way into a sneer, and people dismissed the event altogether— saying, "They must be filled with new wine!" and moving on from what the Spirit was doing with and through the church. But that does not have to be our conclusion. If we make a little birdhouse in our souls, we leave room for what the Spirit can do in us and through us. Knowing the Spirit has a home within us, we can be drawn out of our own sheltered spaces to experience a world that is breathtaking. A prayer from the Northumbria Community, a place in Scotland that draws upon Celtic Christianity, prays this prayer:

Most powerful Holy Spirit, come down upon us. From heaven, where the ordinary is made glorious, and glory seems but ordinary, bathe us with Your brilliance of Your light like dew.

On this day of Pentecost, may you make space for the ordinary to become holy. May you bathe in the Spirit's brilliance. May your lives make glorious the visions and dreams the Spirit brings to build her nest in you.