

## Between Faith and Fear

Acts 2:1-21

*Pentecost/ 31<sup>st</sup> May 2020*

I'm not sure how to do this, say this, think this, feel this. I'm struggling, to be honest. Searching for the connection between the events of this week—more than 100,000 lives lost to the novel coronavirus, 100,000 bodies, people who didn't have to die, and the killing of George Floyd, a Black body in handcuffs under the knee of a law officer for eight minutes, crying out for breath, "I can't breathe," crying out for his mother, and then the protests in Minneapolis-St. Paul, mostly peaceful, yet full of rage and anger, decades, centuries of racial injustice and inequity yet again crying out to be heard, seen, echoing in the streets in Los Angeles, Louisville, Atlanta, New York, Washington, the White House goes on lockdown, and then I heard that White supremacist groups may have infiltrated the lawful protests in what looks like an organized, calculated response throughout the United States, insidiously using rightful protest, righteous anger and grief as a cover to destroy and burn Black communities and businesses, streets are burning, buildings burning —yes, I'm struggling with the connection, the synchronicity of all of this and Pentecost and this text.

We're reading about tongues of fire, associate the Spirit with fire, and fires rage in our cities. We're talking about the Spirit, the breath of God—in John's Gospel, Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into his fearful disciples (Jn. 20:19-23)—and we have George Floyd crying, "I can't breathe." We have the early followers of Jesus who are full of faith and wonder and joy and confusion over the resurrection of their Lord, eager to continue his work, but they're afraid to step out in faith in a city, in a state, in an empire that just lynched their Lord—lynched *our* Lord.<sup>1</sup> How do we hold *all* of this together? And where is the Holy Spirit in all of this today?

These are my questions. They're living questions. Ones I can't answer. Somehow, we need to hold these tensions in us, hold them in our bodies, sit with our discomfort, sit with these uncomfortable feelings for a while and wait and see what emerges.

Pentecost marks the coming of the Holy Spirit into the world, the birth of the church, this body of Christ's suffering love in the world. We give thanks for the gift of the Spirit who's still at work in us, through us. And this means it's *our* job to watch for the Spirit's movement and then ask, "What does this mean?" (Acts 2:12). We watch, even stalk the Spirit's movement and then follow. We look for clues. We look for signs of the Spirit searching us (1 Cor. 2:9-13), moving us, laboring to birth the reign of God in us and our communities. The Spirit, I find, is most active in places of extreme tension, in the struggle between what God desires for humanity—freedom, justice, hope, safety, dignity— and all that feverishly, demonically works against what God desires. Look for the Spirit in those in-between situations, the place of freedom's ferment, where the Spirit is laboring to birth something new and where broken, wounded, sinful human beings work against justice, and obliterate hope, and abuse power, and intentionally impede the formation of what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) called "[the beloved community](#)."<sup>2</sup> It's a tension and in that in-between place we can sense the Spirit moving.

The church lives and breathes and comes alive and serves in the place of tension. I love the way Willie James Jennings puts it—Jennings is professor of systematic theology and Africana studies at Yale—I came across these lines several weeks ago and they have haunted me ever since: “The church was born in the tight space between faith and fear and forever lives in that space. Only the Holy Spirit keeps that space from collapsing in on us.”<sup>3</sup>

We live in that tight space between faith and fear. This is certainly no less true today. And in that tight space, that in-between space, that liminal or threshold space, the Spirit lives and breathes and struggles to birth the vision of Christ in us, which is the vision of God, which is the vision of love into a world hell-bent on destroying itself.

On Pentecost we remember that the church—not the building, not the institution—the church, the living body of Christ, is always present wherever the Spirit is *speaking*. Citing Jennings again (I really value his insights), “The Miracle of Pentecost is less in the hearing and much more in the speaking.”<sup>4</sup> It’s a moment of revolution. People are able to hear and understand across cultures, across boundaries of race and class and nationality. But before that happens, there is the moment of divine power when the Spirit seizes one distinctive feature of our humanity and that’s *language*. Pentecost is “God taking hold of a tongue and voice, mind, and heart, and body. This is a joining,” Jennings says, “unprecedented, unanticipated, unwanted, yet complete joining. Those that gathered in prayer [in Jerusalem] asked for power. They may have asked for the Holy Spirit to come, but they did not ask for this. This is real grace, untamed grace. It is the grace that replaces our fantasies of power over people with God’s fantasy for desire for people.”<sup>5</sup> And there’s a world of difference between the two.

Where is the Spirit at work today? Who’s to say for sure. I hear it in the voices and chants, the anger and rage of the protesters—not every voice, to be clear—but the voices of those who are *truly* crying out in pain and anguish for the wrong done to them, people speaking out and demanding justice and fairness on behalf of their neighbor, voices of black and brown and white bodies who together hunger and yearn for life, who want to breathe and and breathe freely. I hear the Spirit in those who want society to change for the well-being of everyone, not for some, and they really want to work for that change, they want to birth a new world, new relationships.

I believe that God still takes hold of tongues and voices, minds, hearts, and bodies and speaks the divine dream through us, and then helps us envision and move toward a future that we cannot see (or don’t want to see or won’t see). The Spirit forges that dream and calls us to move toward it. But some can. See it clearly. The visionaries, the dreamers, the poets, the prophets, the reformers, the protesters, they know. Listen for those voices, and those discovering their voice in protest, listen to their witness, their anguish, their pain, their hopes. In many languages, across the boundaries of race and class and nationality. For the Spirit loves to remove these boundaries and these ridiculous divisions, which we have created and behind which we love to hide (Eph. 2:16).

We’ve seen a lot of images in the news of violence and destruction in the streets of the Twin Cities. People are scared. But there’s something else happening. My friend and colleague Tim Hart-Anderson is pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis, a church I

know well from my years working with the Covenant Network. Tim shared these words: “The city is convulsing with rage. Local and national histories of racism and police brutality have consequences. The streets are filled with angry young people from the African American community, joined by thousands of other young whites, Latinx, Asian Americans, and immigrants. I was at a protest yesterday. Young Muslim women in hijabs were carrying signs and shouting the name, George Floyd. A young white woman wearing a Grinnell College t-shirt was there [a college in Iowa founded by progressive Congregationalists from New England in 1846]. Nurses. Anarchists. People in wheelchairs. Spanish-speakers. Somalis. Hmong. Even a young Korean American elder from Westminster’s session. It is an uprising.”

One of the confessional statements of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is the *Brief Statement of Faith*, written in 1983 to mark the reunion of the northern and southern streams of the church that split in 1861 over the question of slavery. I love the way it describes the work of the Holy Spirit. This is what we claim, this is our dream, this is our vision:

In a broken and fearful world  
the Spirit gives us courage  
to pray without ceasing,  
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,  
to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,  
to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,  
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace<sup>6</sup>

May it be so.

*Come, Holy Spirit! Come!*

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<sup>1</sup> Theologian James H. Cone (1938-2018) compared the cross to the lynching tree in his seminal work *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013). This is essential reading for the living of these days. Here’s my review written for *The Presbyterian Outlook*, <https://pres-outlook.org/2013/04/the-cross-and-the-lynching-tree/>.

<sup>2</sup> The theme of the “beloved community” runs through the writings, speeches, and sermons of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. A good overview of the concept or vision may be found here: <https://www.religion-online.org/article/martin-luther-kings-vision-of-the-beloved-community/>.

<sup>3</sup> Willie James Jennings, *Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 67.

<sup>4</sup> Jennings, 27.

<sup>5</sup> Jennings, 28.

<sup>6</sup> Brief Statement of Faith, *Book of Confessions*, Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).