

Sermon for Sunday, May 31, 2020 - "Fire, Body, Breath"

The Day of Pentecost
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

The Day of Pentecost is normally a joyous celebration of the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit shows up in all sorts of ways in our scripture readings today, most dramatically in the rush of a violent wind and tongues of fire. The beautiful stole and paraments at Good Shepherd and these red flow-ers evoke that fire of the Holy Spirit. Today we're also told that Spirit animates the body of Christ, that God sends forth the Spirit to give breath to all creation, and that Jesus breathes out the Holy Spirit upon us.

The Pentecost scriptures are full of such powerful images and sounds of fire, body, and breath. Yet, this Pentecost they feel quite jarring amidst the images and sounds of fire, bodies and breath from Minneapolis and St. Paul: a police officer with his knee on George Floyd's neck for so many long minutes as George pleads "please, please, please I can't breathe"; cities on fire; bodies crying out for justice; the sounds of tear gas and violence in the streets. And all of this under the shadow of COVID-19 when so many are gasping for breath.

This Pentecost I don't feel joyful. I feel afraid: afraid for people of color who, on a daily basis, know so much more fear for their lives and their children than I will ever experience; afraid for law enforcement officers - those I know and love and so many more - who serve others in this country that is so shaped by racism and violence; afraid for my hometowns of Minneapolis and St. Paul and for my family and friends, for you and your loved ones who live there. That fear, these images and sounds have brought me to tears often this week.

In the midst of this, I'm grateful that this week I have also been reminded of an invitation to pray with the news, offered by Good Shepherd member Jane Jakoubek. This past Wednesday I shared that practice during Holden Evening Prayer. Each week I'm offering an invitation to a prayer practice that you can use at home and this time it was Jane's practice of praying with the news. This practice was so helpful to me this week as the news got more and more painful. I'll give a quick summary here and you can find more under the Worship Tab of the website on the Prayer Practices and Reflections page.

- Jane encourages us to pray before, during and after we engage with the news.
- Before we begin, we can ask God to help us see each news item through the lens of faith, hope, and love, to suspend judgement and stay open.
- During the news, we can cry out "Lord have mercy" and give thanks for signs of God's presence.
- After the news, we can pray with the feelings the news has evoked after we engage it.
- Jane also asks us to commit to praying for one of the stories from the news throughout the days to come and to ask what God is calling us to do in response to it.

These practices have helped me to remain present to the story of George Floyd's death and the protests following it. As I've prayed with this story, I've sensed God calling me to pay attention to the pain of people of color, to my siblings in our human family who have been so oppressed by centuries of racism, white privilege and white supremacy. It is hard to stay with pain. I want to look away. I feel overwhelmed and hopeless by it all. It is easier to turn to anger and judgement. I'm tempted to take a stand about the issues on Facebook and then think I've done my part. Yet, I sense God is calling me and calling us to stay with the pain. We need to see and hear and pay attention to the pain.

I am concerned that in this time of COVID-19 we are not paying enough attention to the pain in our world. We are turning to outrage and fear instead. Partly, that's because physical distancing is impacting our patterns for dealing with grief. We can't gather for funerals and memorials. We can't physically sit with and embrace those outside our households. Partly, it's because of a cultural discomfort with grief and pain. Americans much prefer being positive and upbeat. Yet, if we don't tend to our grief it will come out sideways as anger and judgement and stridency. Healing and love are released as we pay attention to the pain. God enters into the pain of our world in Jesus and calls us to do the same. We especially need to pay attention to the pain of those who are black and brown who are being disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. And we need to listen very closely to the pain of these siblings who are not safe in the United States.

One of those voices is that of black preacher, the Rev. Dr. Ron Bell Jr, Lead Pastor of Camphor Memorial United Methodist Church in St. Paul. I want you to hear his voice today. Dr. Bell shared this powerful post early Friday morning before the police officer was arrested. He writes,¹

"My city is burning, but not in the way the media is showing. Did you see the fire, not the one burning down the precinct but the one burning in the hearts of the wounded in my community? The grieving mothers and grandmothers recalling the voice of our dear brother George Floyd as he called for his mother while taking his last breath. The burning of the hearts of we who wept when our governmental leaders refused to arrest the murderer of this wicked and inhumane deed. Did you see that fire?

Did you see the shattered glass, not those easily replaceable windows scattered in pieces on the ground under our feet? Instead, the shattered glass of expectation for justice, the shattered glass of respect for our humanity that our murderers continue to display, the shattered glass of hope as we watched our brother's body lay lifeless under the knee of his murderer. Did you see that glass shatter?

You must have witnessed the looting? Not the ones the cameras and social media love to exploit, but instead the looting of our human rights. The looting of our constitutional rights as citizens. The looting of our communities for decades by corporations for greed. Did you see that looting?

I think you were so busy looking for a riot that you missed the gathering of the grieving. I think you were so busy looking for looters that you missed the lament and heartbreak of a community. I think you were so busy looking for trouble that you missed the tragedy of systemic racialized trauma on the bodies of black and brown people. Tonight, tomorrow, and even the next day I beg of you, look again. Look again.

¹<https://www.drtonbell.com/post/do-not-look-away?fbclid=IwAR0GYgZLMtfrnz-FFSNnSQk2M8k4qpcALjJOUqCbqaPV9YTq-Ef-TpRpwk>

I do not have a scripture for you. I do not have a perfectly curated historical epitaph from a giant like King to impress you with. Instead, I have a request for you. Look again. See the trauma and pain of my community. See the anger and anxiety. See the tiredness. Look again.

Once you have really looked upon our sorrow, once you have put away your hashtags, retweets and emojis, once you have set with the weight of our sorrow what you will discover is my city has become your city. My pain has become your pain. That young person protesting has become your young person grieving ... Do not look away. For then and only then will you be truly with us! Look again.”

Beloved of God, we need to see this pain and hear it. We need to stay with it. We need to pray with it. We need to pay attention to the images and sounds of fire, body and breath that come to us today from both Minneapolis and from scripture. We need to ask God what these images and sounds have to say to our lives.

What in our lives, personally and collectively, needs to be burned away? What patterns of anger, judgement, fear and privilege are preventing us from seeing, honoring, and being with black and brown bodies and from celebrating the dignity of these beloved children of God?

How will we honor God’s Spirit that breathes out life for all people and all creation and honor the breath of all people?

How can we see and respond to racial injustice in Decorah, in our own communities, within the ELCA?

How can we who have privilege use it to amplify the voices of our siblings of color and join them in advocating for racial justice?

How will we live as the body of Christ bearing witness to that Spirit of love at work in the world?

We need to pray. We need to see. We need to listen. And we need to keep doing this long after the cameras have left Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Please pray and join me in discerning and acting together as a community. As we do this, we can trust that the Holy Spirit is at work in our world to renew the face of the earth. The fire of the Holy Spirit is at work to get our attention and trouble us and empower us to work for the healing of all creation.

The Holy Spirit that Jesus breathes upon us is at work.

The Holy Spirit is at work for you, for the body of Christ, and for all bodies.

Let us look, listen, pray and join the work of the Spirit.

Let’s take a moment for silent prayer.