

**Sermon for Sunday, May 28, 2023**  
**Last Sunday of Easter - Day of Pentecost**  
**“Dancing in the Darkness”**  
**Reverend Amy Zalk Larson**  
**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church**  
**Decorah, Iowa**

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

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

The Spirit wasn't just poured out long ago, not only given to those first disciples as they hid in fear. Today, when the world faces so many threats, when we get locked in fear, when, really, we all need a collective deep breath, the Holy Spirit is working to set us free. The Spirit gives us visions of God's promised future, breathes out peace and empowers us to forgive.

One person who helps me to trust the Spirit is the Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III. He's an incredible preacher, pastor and leader who helps people live into Dr. King's vision of the beloved community. I got to hear him preach and teach recently. I've just finished listening to his book, *Dancing in the Darkness: Spiritual Lessons for Thriving in Turbulent Times*.<sup>1</sup> This is one of three books that Decorah ELCA congregations will be reading and discussing together this summer. Watch for more in the upcoming newsletter.

Dr. Moss serves as senior pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in the southside of Chicago. Trinity is, quote, “unashamedly black and unapologetically Christian,” and the home congregation of former president Obama. During the 2008 presidential campaign, the congregation came under intense national scrutiny because of a few words, taken out of context, from one sermon preached by its former pastor the Rev. Jeremiah Wright. Death threats began to pour into the congregation, at least one hundred a week.

Back then Rev. Moss was the new, young pastor of the congregation, and he was scared. He feared for his own life, for his wife and two small children, for the congregation. He worried his fear was preventing him from leading well. One night, he heard sounds coming from inside his house, sounds he soon realized were coming from his six-year-old daughter Makayla's room. He grabbed a baseball bat and prepared to defend her from an intruder. Heart pounding, he opened the door to her bedroom. Makayla was out of bed, spinning and twirling around the room, pigtails flying. She was dancing. Dancing in the dark, at 3:00 a.m, dancing a joyful routine inspired by the ballet lessons she was taking.

“Go to bed Makayla”, Moss said with a firm voice. He almost went into full dad mode angrily lecturing her about not disrupting the family, especially in a time like this. But then he felt the Spirit say to him, *listen to her, look at her*: “She's dancing. The darkness is around her as it's all around you - but she's still dancing.”<sup>2</sup> The darkness is around her, but it is not in her. The Spirit worked through Makayla to prophesy to her father that night, your sons and your daughters shall prophesy the books of Acts tell us, and that happened that night. Makayla gave him a vision of how God

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<sup>1</sup> *Dancing in the Darkness: Spiritual Lessons for Thriving in Turbulent Times*. Otis Moss III. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2023. The stories from the sermon are found in this book.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 95.

turns our sorrow into dancing, of how to live with freedom amid the darkness rather than letting the darkness invade our spirits and lock us in fear.

Dr. Moss shared the vision with the congregation and then, some weeks later, they got to live it out together. The fundamentalist Westboro Baptist Church, followers of Pastor Fred Phelps, showed up at Trinity to protest on a Sunday morning. They carried signs with outrageous claims about abortion and the congregation, they shouted racist epithets through megaphones. Mothers and grandmothers had to walk a gauntlet of hate with their children to get to the sanctuary. Moss knew that the protestors were trying to provoke the congregation and the surrounding community, trying to get them to react with anger and violence that would go viral. The spiritual home of Trinity UCC was under assault. Yet the Spirit did not abandon them.

The Spirit helped them draw on Makayla's vision and the teaching of Dr. King, to respond with powerful love. Dr. Moss went and found the choir and told them, "Here's what I need you to do. We're going to march outside and surround the protestors, we're going to sing to the glory of God so loudly that our voices, the voices of love, drown out the shouts of hate." He writes, "The [choir] went out there, a hundred strong, and got right up in the faces of the Westboro people singing 'This Little Light of Mine.'" They weren't literally dancing, well maybe some were, but they'd found a way to dance in the darkness.<sup>3</sup>

"We created a wall of sound so strong that the congregants could file into the sanctuary without hearing the horrific chanting. The words of hate were not destroyed by the sounds of joy; they were transformed in midair. Then the choir asked the protestors if they could pray for them. The Westboro folks declined the offer but still the choir began to pray what Moss describes as Pentecostal prayer - [prayer] deep from one's soul, [prayer] designed by the spirit to place even a non-believer in a space of reflection."<sup>4</sup> The Holy Spirit empowered them to sing and pray, act with peace, to respond with the strong love and forgiveness of Christ. The protestors got into their vans and drove away.

When the risen Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit upon those first disciples, he helped them to know peace amid their fears, to dance in the darkness. He then empowered them, and all of his followers, to forgive sins, to loose and release ourselves and ourselves from reactive, fearful ways of being. Jesus also described what happens when we don't forgive sins - they are retained. Another way to translate this is that sins are bound tight. When we don't forgive, we and others are bound up tight by the violation of relationship, bound to react in kind to those who hurt us.

Today, we have so many reasons to feel threatened. Just tuning into the news, showing up at a family gathering, or listening to a colleague can evoke fear and distress. There are so many reasons to feel despair, to hide away locked in fear; so many opportunities to react with anger and hatred and violence.

Through the gift of the Spirit, Jesus has given us another, life-giving way to respond. We are not only victims of what happens to us. We have the power to respond in ways that free us, in ways that stop the cycles of fear and hatred and violence. We have the power to release, to loose, to heal rather than make things worse. We have the power that can change hearts and people, communities and the world - the power of forgiveness. The Spirit is at work in and through us to set people free.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 100.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 101.

Today, the risen Christ comes among us in his body and blood, through his word of promise to say, peace be with you all, take a deep breath.

Forgive sins. Dance in the darkness.