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Journal for Preachers

Volume XLIX Number 4

Pentecost 2026

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Published quarterly in time for Advent, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost, the *Journal* is a unique resource for the high calling of proclaiming the gospel. Articles are thematically arranged and coordinated with the church calendar.

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The Reverend Dr. Thomas G. Long is the Bandy Professor Emeritus of Preaching at Candler School of Theology. His latest book is *Proclaiming the Parables: Preaching and Teaching the Kingdom of God*.

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The Reverend Annanda Barclay is a pastor at Sunnyvale Presbyterian Church in Sunnyvale, California. When she isn't podcasting or providing spiritual care you can find her enjoying the outdoors with dear friends and a good book!

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The Reverend Dr. Patrick Johnson is the Pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Asheville, North Carolina. He is the author of *The Mission of Preaching: Equipping the Community for Faithful Witness*, and holds a PhD in Practical Theology from Princeton Theological Seminary.

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Pastor Deborah J. Chambers is the senior pastor of Calvert County Baptist Church in Prince Frederick, Maryland, where she leads with a vision to unite believers to glorify God by engaging, equipping, and empowering disciples, toward restoration, growth, and community impact.

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The Reverend Mark Ramsey serves as the Executive Director of The Ministry Collaborative after three decades as a parish pastor. He is the publisher of *Journal for Preachers*.

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The Reverend Samantha Gonzalez-Block serves as the pastor of the Interfaith Families Project of Greater Washington, a community of nearly one hundred interfaith families who respectfully practice Judaism and Christianity side-by-side.

Andrew Connors: Pentecost Power

The Reverend Andrew Connors is the Pastor of Brown Memorial Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, Maryland. He also serves on the Strategy Team of Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development (BUILD), a nearly 50 year old community power organization in the city.

Publisher's Foreword

This issue—filled with Spirit-led articles and sermons from gifted colleagues—brings to conclusion the 49th year of *Journal for Preachers*. In a time of significant cultural and ecclesial shifts and challenges, we work to bring you *JP* in the firm conviction that the voices curated in these pages are crucial and their wisdom ever more needed. Entering our 50th year, *Journal for Preachers* will initiate several changes, as we seek to continue nurturing a conversation about vital and faithful preaching.

This issue is the last that will appear in print. Starting in the fall, we will send you a digital edition that will look very much like what you hold in your hands now. Rising printing and postage costs—along with the implications of tariffs—have made it impossible to continue producing a print journal at any reasonable price point. This shift will also bring an enhanced website and the possibility of occasional special digital editions. ***Please ensure we have your correct email address, as the Advent 2026 issue will be delivered electronically. If you're unsure, contact our subscription office using the information on the masthead.***

Thanks to generous grants that The Ministry Collaborative has received, focused on preaching and on sharing the Christian story, **we will be able to offer *Journal for Preachers* to all subscribers at no cost for at least the next four years**. We hope that this special opportunity will, in turn, encourage subscribers to share the resources offered freely with colleagues and friends. (Please note: if you have a multi-year subscription, please use the masthead subscription information to contact us, and we will be happy to offer a prorated refund.)

Jessica Patchett, who has served as the journal's editor with such focus and imagination, is stepping away from the role to tend to a new call at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis and a newborn child. I am deeply grateful to Jessica for her fruitful and energetic collaboration over these past several years.

We are pleased and fortunate to welcome Ryan Bonfiglio as our new editor. At Emory's Candler School of Theology, Ryan serves as Associate Professor in the Practice of Old Testament and Executive Director of The Candler Foundry, an initiative that bridges the gap between church and academy by making seminary-level learning accessible and engaging for congregations, communities, and the broader public. As a member of the team at The Ministry Collaborative, Ryan also leads international immersion experiences to Greece and Israel/Palestine designed to inspire and enrich the preaching ministries of pastors in TMC's network. Ryan brings to *JP* years of experience working with congregations across a wide range of theological traditions and a deep passion for supporting and training pastors as they strive toward preaching that is creative, biblically rooted, and theologically responsive to the most pressing questions of the communities they serve. (Ryan is also from Philadelphia, so time that would otherwise be spent rooting for Philly sports teams can be poured into *JP* as those teams regularly fall out of contention early each season ...)

In a multi-layered essay that anchors this edition, Tom Long observes, echoing Willie Jennings, that "Pentecost did not emerge from our moral imagination but from God's unpredictable will." Each contribution here seeks to amplify that truth. Pentecost is our invitation to receive, grapple with, and be emboldened by the work of the Holy Spirit. With the help of the sermons and articles in this issue, I hope we will all be better equipped to respond to the question Tom raises: "Where is the untamable wind of the Spirit taking us now?"

– Mark Ramsey

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When Hope Goes to Work

Beverly Gaventa
Austin, Texas

> *"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."*
>
> - Romans 15:13 NRSVue

> *"Hopefulness … is the warrior emotion."*
>
> – Nick Cave

Having spent much of my adult life engaged in studying and teaching the letters of Paul, I am fascinated to see which phrases or verses emerge from time to time as slogans, even rallying cries, for various groups of Christians. Galatians 3:28 is the most obvious example, at least in my own lifetime and among progressive Christians. Romans 1:16 is another, especially among more evangelically oriented Christians ("For I am not ashamed of the gospel …") "All things work together for good" (or better: "God makes all things work together") in 8:28, shorn of its essential context, is a perilous sentimental favorite. I am sure we would find Romans 13:1 on that "hit parade" in some quarters of American nationalism, since it comes to the foreground conveniently by way of squelching dissent.

Recently I have noticed Romans 15:13 cited with some frequency, and reasons for that attention are not hard to locate. Paul's identification of God with hope and his prayer that Roman believers might "abound in hope" are welcome reminders of hope in a time when even Emily Dickinson's relentless "thing with feathers" seems to have flown out of sight.

For Paul, as 15:13 makes clear, hope comes from God and through the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Hope not only comes from God and the gifts of the Spirit, but hope is oriented toward God. Paul does occasionally speak of hope in the pedestrian sense of wishing for safe travel, as in 1 Corinthians 16:7, or wanting to be understood, as in 2 Corinthians 1:13. Even in those contexts, however, God has an active role ("if the Lord permits," "by the grace of God"). For the most part, Paul's expression of hope is what Philip Ziegler has aptly called "Godward hope" by contrast with "worldward hope."[1] When Romans 4 declares that Abraham was "hoping against hope," the text attributes to Abraham hope elicited by God's promise and directed toward God's action *by contrast with* a worldward hope that relies on the human capacity for birth.

The language of hope that repeats in chapters 5 and 8 is consistently Godward hope.[2] To "boast in our hope of the glory of God"[3] is to live out of confidence in God's work in Jesus. Paul seems to unpack that confidence in Romans 8, with its repeated emphasis on hope (vv. 8, 24). This emphasis returns in chapter 15, with its

claims that "we" have hope through Israel's scriptures, and with the citation of Isaiah about Gentiles "hoping" in the "root of Jesse."

The prayer of 15:13 encapsulates this Godward hope. The opening lines of chapter 15 anticipate eschatological reconciliation between Jew and Gentile, but that reconciliation does not itself constitute the fullness of Paul's hope. Something vastly greater even than human reconciliation is at stake. The horizon of 15:1–13 is the glorification of God.

Importantly, 15:13 is a prayer. Paul prays to the "God of hope" for abundance that "you" might abound in hope. Notably, hope is not an ought here, not a spiritual exercise, a muscle to train on a daily basis so as to be ready for the marathon of life. It is a gift, a God-given condition in which Christian life takes place.

All of this is well and good. It makes for good slogans, but then what? What does hope look like? Where do we see it? If hope is a warrior, as Nick Cave so winningly writes[4], what does that warrior do? It's one thing to appreciate Abraham's "Godward hope" and be moved by Paul's expectation of God's eschatological glory. It is quite another to understand what hope looks like for us, in a time when each day brings fresh disasters—whether those of an increasingly fragile climate or those produced by a political climate so toxic we struggle to see a way forward. For preachers and teachers, there is the additional challenge presented by misunderstanding and even contempt for the name Christian, a fact that is itself dispiriting.

How does Paul's language of hope help us in the living of our faith in these chaotic times? Here I think the remainder of Romans 15 may be instructive. Admittedly, the language of hope does not appear in the passage, yet it displays Paul's own actions in anticipation of the eschatological unity of Jew and Gentile and fueled by the God of hope.

Romans 15:14–33 is highly unusual in the context of Paul's letters, a fact that is easily overlooked. Paul does not elsewhere comment on the letter he has just written or sum up his apostolic labor thus far, as he does in vv. 14–21. Nor does he elsewhere expand on his plans going forward, as he does in vv. 22–33. Already those familiar with other letters will be taking note.

What draws my eye in connection with the work of hope is the final section of the chapter (vv. 22–33). Paul first elaborates his desire to go to Rome, having already expressed that desire in the letter opening (1:11–13). Rome will be the launching spot for his work in Spain. But then, quite abruptly, Paul introduces an immediate departure for Jerusalem (v. 25). Only after his work in Jerusalem is complete will Paul visit Rome on the way to a new mission in Spain.

Several things here capture my attention. First, Jerusalem is well out of the way, a detour of roughly 700 nautical miles. No one would plot a course from Corinth to Rome by way of Jerusalem without a major need to do so. Second, Jerusalem is hardly a priority if Paul's vocation is to take the gospel to new places, which is what he has just affirmed in 15:20.[5] A more efficient strategy would have had Paul delegate

a representative to Jerusalem with the collection, so that Paul himself might travel directly to Rome and then Spain. Third, Jerusalem is dangerous for Paul, or at least his comments reveal his fear that Jerusalem will be dangerous. It is not at all clear that either Paul or the offering will be welcome in Jerusalem.

Yet this journey is urgent, and not for the reasons that come immediately to mind. It is not just that Jerusalem is in famine, and therefore its population is in urgent need. The more we learn about the fragility of life in the first century, the clearer it becomes that many people experienced serious need on a regular basis. Indeed, most lived close to the edge of disaster at all times.[6] Nor is Paul attuned to Jerusalem because of its inherent importance in the history of God's dealings with Israel. That concern marks Luke's Gospel and the book of Acts far more than it does the letters of Paul. The collection Paul takes will fulfill human need in Jerusalem, but for Paul the urgency is that it represents the shared participation of Jew and Gentile in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Even the word he uses conveys this concern. Although above I have used the customary term "collection" for the fund Paul takes to Jerusalem, the Greek word is *koinōnia*, which actually means a fellowship, a community. As Paul sees it, the fund he takes is primarily an act of making community. Or better, the fund is an act of recognizing a fellowship or community that God has already made. All of those who are "in Christ" have been given to each other by him and remain in relationship with one another as with him (Romans 12:5).[7] If believers in Jerusalem reject the collection, the fund, in Paul's mind that would be tantamount to the rejection of the reality of the body of Christ. The stakes are exceedingly high.

It should not surprise us, then, to find Paul's request for prayer. In other letters, he asks for prayer but always in a general way (1 Thessalonians 5:25; Philemon 22). Here the request is both urgent and specific: he prays that he will be "delivered" from unbelievers in Jerusalem and that the collection will be accepted by believers in that city. Moreover, he frames the request with the intense verb "contend along with me in prayer." The struggle here is a real one.

This prayer reveals Paul's anxiety both for his personal safety and also for the mission. Routinely, New Testament scholars claim that in writing to the Romans Paul needs to establish his authority in a city where he is unknown. (I have regularly written and taught this point myself.) But this prayer, with its fears and needs, seems calculated to undermine Paul's authority. It looks more like what would be thought weakness than it does like authority. His willingness to subject himself to the charge of weakness in itself conveys the severity of the situation.

Other ways forward are imaginable, if Paul wanted to avoid danger. The smooth answer, the easy answer, would be to give up on the project of recognizing the unity of Jew and Gentile in Christ. It appears, however, that Paul's confidence (aka hope) in God's future for Jew and Gentile alike requires him to go to Jerusalem, despite the danger, the risk to reputation, the fear of rejection. He cannot avoid going, because the God of hope has made a fellowship that would not let him do otherwise. A rough

analogy (always a dangerous move) familiar to us might be found in Martin Luther King Jr.'s decision to go in person to Memphis in April 1968, despite full awareness of the danger, because his own vocation demanded that he advocate for the struggling garbage workers in that city.

How is this passage connected to hope in our time? I am not proposing that somehow this stage in Paul's work is a "model" for others, that we find a pattern in this event of the first century and replicate it in our own situations. My point is far simpler: it is that in Paul's determination to go to Jerusalem we see the evidence of hope. We can trace its outworkings. Godward hope both empowers us and compels us to persist toward what we understand to be God's will (Romans 12:2), flawed and partial though our knowledge may be. More than merely clinging to some slender thread of hope, Godward hope flourishes among us "by the power of the Holy Spirit" (15:13).

Does this emphasis on the role of God, in the person of Jesus and by the Spirit, deny the reality or importance of life in the world? *Mē genoito!* as Paul would say. To emphasize Godward hope over against worldward hope may raise that fear in the minds of some, especially given the frequent claim (really a calumny) that Paul is not interested in the real world. It is not that Godward hope abandons life in the human realm, but Godward hope does not rely on myths of human autonomy or self-determination. It exposes the values of the marketplace and the halls of what passes for power for the frauds they are, with their steady practices of quantifying and controlling and manipulating. And it instead relies on the values of the crucified and risen Messiah, the one who died for the weak, the ungodly, the sinners, even those enemies of God–namely, us (Romans 5:6–11). Godward hope looks to the "realer world"[8] for how to live hopefully even in these chaotic and cruel days.

Notes

1. "'Hoping Against Hope': God's Politics and Ours at the Turning of the Ages." *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 83 (2026), forthcoming.

2. Here I will keep exegetical explanations brief, but they are based on my earlier work in *Romans: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2024).

3. NRSVue reads "*sharing* the glory of God" in 5:2, suggesting that the point is eschatological glory for human beings, but the Greek is ambiguous, leaving the emphasis on God.

4. https://www.theredhandfiles.com/do-you-still-believe-in-us/ In response to a father who fears that his own growing cynicism will engulf his child, Cave commends every "redemptive or loving act," no matter how small—such as reading to a child or singing a song with a child—as a way of keeping "the devil down in the hole."

5. Rome also has been evangelized, although Paul seems to have some doubts about the gospel that has been rightly received there. Notice that he plans to "preach" in Rome, i.e., to announce the news (1:15).

6. That statement is by no means intended as a way of disassociating Christians from the obligation to care for the poor. Ample evidence exists of that sense of obligation elsewhere in Paul and the remainder of the New Testament, to say nothing of the Hebrew prophets.

7. Notice that Jews remain Jews, Gentiles remain Gentiles, but together they inhabit the body of Christ.

8. The ungrammatical but piercingly accurate phrase "realer world," comes from Jamie Davies, *Theology on the Run: Apocalyptic Pastoral Theology in Paul's Thessalonian Letters* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2025), 212.

Preaching a Good Word for the Holy Spirit on Pentecost

Thomas G. Long
Cambridge, Maryland

> *"Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.'"*
>
> – Acts 19:1-2

Without the Spirit,
God is far away,
Christ belongs to the past,
The Gospel is a dead letter,
The Church is a mere organization,
Authority takes the form of domination,
Mission is turned into propaganda,
Worship is reduced to bare recollection,
Christian action becomes the morality of a slave.

But in the Spirit,

God is near,
The risen Christ is present with us here and now,
The Gospel is the power of life,
The Church signifies Trinitarian communion,
Authority means liberating service,
Mission is an expression of Pentecost,
The Liturgy is a making-present of both past and future,
Human action is divinized.

– Ignatios IV, Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch[1]

Even on Pentecost, it is hard for preachers to know what to say about the Holy Spirit. We preach the usual Pentecost sermon, of course. We retell the famous story, the rushing wind, the tongues as of fire, the diversity of cultures gathered in Jerusalem, the amazement in hearing the gospel proclaimed "in our own languages," the pouring out of the Spirit. And then we become partly mute. Searching for what to say, it is as if we shield our eyes from the blinding glory of the story and run as fast as we can to the relative safety of ethics, to the matter of what we are supposed to do about all this. "The church should honor diversity," we say. "We should seek a unity that doesn't melt away differences, a common life and faith that continues to respect the particularity of cultures, gender, race."

Good moral advice, certainly, but it is finally only our side of the equation, what we should do, our deeds, our responses, our righteous action. What often gets washed out of our preaching on Pentecost is the event itself, the initiating force that opens humanity and beckons us to respond, namely, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit's deeds, the Spirit's initiative, the Spirit's righteous action. Pentecost is an event that is not our own doing, a divine interruption we could never have predicted. Once it happened, we could see how it rhymes with what prophets like Joel promised, but no one in that house in Jerusalem would for a minute have guessed that a power like wind and fire would course through them that very day and revolutionize human life. After all, they had just cast lots to select a new apostle to replace Judas. The last thing most of us church folk anticipate is that a church business meeting to elect new officers would be followed immediately by a jolt of divine voltage that blows all the fuses.

Willie Jennings noted in his brilliant commentary on *Acts* that we sometimes speak of Pentecost as the birthday of the church but forget that "*this child* was not expected."[2] Pentecost did not emerge from our moral imagination but from God's unpredictable will. The central question of the Pentecost story, Jennings asserts, is What is God doing? "The meaning of the speaking in tongues," he says, "is so obvious, so powerful, that it was missed. The Holy Spirit has come …" Yes, there are ethical implications, but they do not spring merely from our principled character or our ability to moralize the Pentecost story but are instead driven by the gale-force wind of the Spirit itself. As Jennings says,

> Now love of neighbor will take on pneumatological dimensions. It will be love that builds directly out of the resurrected body of Jesus. It will be love, as Karl Barth says, that goes into the far country. This is love that cannot be tamed, controlled, or planned, and once unleashed it will drive the disciples forward into the world and drive a question into their lives: Where is the Holy Spirit taking us and into whose lives?[3]

Jennings has it right. The challenging question of Pentecost is, Who is the Holy Spirit and where is the untamable wind of the Spirit taking us now?

Trinitarian Mumbling

Part of our inability to preach clearly about the Holy Spirit comes because the task requires exercising at least some vision of the Trinity and the relationships in the Trinity, and, for most of us, Trinitarian language is not our native tongue. Even those preachers who, perhaps on Trinity Sunday, pull out their seminary notes and then stand in the pulpit, clear their throats, and doggedly march through an attempt to teach the people some basics about the Trinity sometimes come across as if they had pried off the back of an old Swiss pocket watch and now were patiently explaining to the congregation the bewildering ways the gears mesh and the springs flex.

Actually, there is no shame in being a little tongue-tied here. As theologian Robert Jenson observed, even the bishops who worked out the great definitions of divine relationships found in the Nicene Creed were not all that clear about what they meant. "If you were to grab some of those bishops and ask what does *homoousios* mean," said Jenson, "you would have just gotten a stutter" or perhaps, "I do not know, but it sounds well, does it not?"[4]

Nevertheless, the stakes are high. Thomas Aquinus warned that if the church ever quits paying close attention to the distinctions in the Trinity, the biggest price would be the loss of a sense of the Holy Spirit. To some extent that is what has happened to us, especially in the old traditional Western churches. Leave talk about the Holy Spirit to the charismatics and Pentecostals, we say; we'll stick to the less frenzied stuff.

But's it's Pentecost, and we very much need to talk about the Holy Spirit.

To do so faithfully requires walking a tightrope. On the one hand, it is crucial to have a vision of the unity, the oneness, of God. We don't want to talk about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as if they were separate divine chess pieces that move independently across the board of history. As St. John Chrysostom vigorously preached, "It is not possible that where the Spirit is to be found Christ should not be found as well." Likewise, where Christ is found, the Father is at work as well. Where one person of the Trinity is present, the whole Trinity is present. "One is the gift and the power," said Chrysostom, "of Father, Son, and Spirit." Irenaeus of Lyons employed a wonderful image to emphasize the intersection found in the life of the Trinity. He described the Son and Spirit as the two "hands" of God the Father. So, when a Christian is presented the Zen riddle, what is the sound of one hand clapping?, we must confess that, when it comes to the Trinitarian God, we have no idea. God the Father is always clapping with both hands at once.[5]

On the other hand, walking the tightrope also means recognizing that, even though Father, Son, and Spirit are One and indivisible, the New Testament doesn't hesitate for a minute to talk about the distinctive work of God the Father, of God the Son, and of God the Holy Spirit. Yes, the three persons of the Trinity are inseparable, but the gospel story speaks of them in different ways and with separate roles. For example, Jesus says that "the Father is the vinegrower," while Jesus himself is "the true vine" (John 15:1). The Father sends the Holy Spirit in Christ's name, and the Spirit, in turn, "will teach you everything, and remind you of all that [Jesus] said to you" (John 14:26). As for Pentecost, it was the Father who promised the power that came at Pentecost (Luke 24:49), it was Jesus Christ who urged the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for it to come (Luke 24:49), and it was the Holy Spirit who came to the disciples that day, filling them with divine power and turning Babel into blessing.

The question for Pentecost, then, is who is this Holy Spirit who animates the Pentecost story? That's easy, we say. The Holy Spirit is one of the three persons of the Trinity. But, wait, we must be careful here. Even the tried and true Trinitarian

language can sometimes trip us up. We may sing in the words of the great hymn, "God in three Persons, blessed Trinity," but it is becoming ever clearer to us now that the old formula of the Godhead being an assembly of "persons" may no longer work as well as it once did. In our day, the word "person" has packed up its bags and left its ancestral home, migrating toward new individualistic and personalistic meanings that end up savaging good Trinitarian theology.

Today "person" inevitably means a discrete and autonomous individual. I am a "person" and so is my brother Bill and so is Taylor Swift and so is Barack Obama. Sure, we share something, we are members of the same species. Bill, Taylor, Barack, and I are "persons," whereas the Rock of Gibraltar, a Honda Civic, and a cocker spaniel are not. But after that one nod to commonality, the similarity abruptly ends and "person" shifts swiftly toward uniqueness. I want to be my own "person." I am the singular, peculiar, and idiosyncratic Tom Long, and I am definitely not Bill Long, Taylor Swift, or Barack Obama. As the old SNL gag goes, "I'm Chevy Chase, and you're not." To call me a "person" is to draw a circle around the distinctives and to underscore the unique collection of qualities that make up the one and only me.

That is most certainly *not* what the church wishes to say about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit: Identity and Dramatis Persona

To find fresh language for talking about the Trinity and, thus, about the Holy Spirit, we can look with new eyes at the work of the brilliant young fourth-century pastors and theologians known as the Cappadocians: Basil the Great, his younger brother Gregory of Nyssa, and their close friend Gregory of Nazianzus (we should also include Macrina, sister of Basil and Gregory. She was a vital theological thinker and a significant conversation partner in their trinitarian deliberations, but she often gets dimmed out of the history). The Cappadocians engaged in creative thinking about the phrase that God is one being in three "*hypostases."* In contemporary English, the best way to express the Capadocians understanding of "hypostases," suggests Robert Jenson, is not "persons" but "identities." Jenson says if someone were to ask, Who is Robert Jenson? you can answer in various ways. He is the funny guy with a beard, the seminary professor, the husband, and so on. In other words, one guy, the same guy, but with a number of different identities. Jenson goes on to say about the trinitarian God,

> Now there are three identities of the one being of God. Who is this God? Well, he is God the author of the story with his people. Who is this God? He is God settled into that story and an actor in it. Who is God? He is the wind of God that moves history. Or in the language that came to be standard, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And any one of them is a perfect and complete identification of the one God.[6]

Catholic theologian Herbert McCabe provides a helpful illustration of how the notion of identities is always relational. McCabe supposes that his niece is soon to deliver her first child and that next week he will become for the first time a great-uncle. This week he is not a great-uncle, but next week he will have a new identity as a great-uncle. It would be misleading to think that great-uncle Herbert is a different person from pre-great-uncle Herbert. "My becoming a great-uncle," he says, "involves no change in me at all; it is entirely a matter of a change in my niece Kate and what is occurring in her womb."[7] In other words, McCabe will not be a different person but will have a new *identity* because there is now a new great-nephew or great-niece, that is to say because a new relationship has been formed. McCabe cannot be a great-uncle all by himself; no, that identity needs a great-niece or nephew. So it is with the trinitarian God. God is One, and there is only one God, God has three identities, Father, Son, and Spirit, three relationships within the Trinity.

Without getting too deep in the weeds here, this notion of God as one with three identities, if left alone and defined in a weak sense, could flirt with the old heresy of modalism, the claim that what we call Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are merely guises that God assumes from time to time. The notion of divine identities gets stronger if combined with another helpful image some recent theologians have proposed, that is to understand the Holy Spirit, along with the Father and the Son, as *dramatis personae* in the gospel narrative. In a novel, a play, or a short story, the characters are distinct and have substance and integrity on their own, and yet they are defined only in relationship to the other characters and as they play out their roles in the fabric of the whole plot. Shakespeare's character Hamlet, for example, is sometimes described as an "anti-hero," but, if so, his anti-heroism develops only in relationship to what he does or doesn't do about his dead father, his mother, and the other characters in the fabric of the whole play. Hamlet is a distinct character; he is not Ophelia, he is Hamlet. But who he is as a character, his identity, is constituted only by his relationship with Ophelia and the other characters.

The inner life of the Trinity is a ceaseless interaction and interpenetration of Father, Son, and Spirit, and this unified life of the Trinity, this One God in three, is projected like a movie onto the screen of history. What results is a story, the gospel story, a narrative that is told in Scripture, in which Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are actors, characters, different *dramatis personae*, in the story. "'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit' is a very compressed telling of the narrative by which Scripture identifies God," says Jenson.[8] Or, as Jürgen Moltmann puts it, "The New Testament talks about God by proclaiming in narrative the relationships of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."[9]

To tell the full gospel story, then, we are called to let the plot unfold with the entire array of divine *personae*, to show their interactions and relationships, including those of the Holy Spirit. Preachers tell and retell the story of God the Father and the story of the Christ, but we should not neglect, perhaps especially but not only on Pentecost, to tell the full story including the story of the *dramatis persona* called

the Holy Spirit, who filled the disciples with power, gathered three thousand people for baptism, performed wonders and signs through the apostles, and created a new community of worship, generosity, fellowship, and goodwill (Acts 2).

Sometimes we unintentionally narrow the narrative. Even those preachers who have zeal to keep their sermons theological, and to ground always the ethical vision of the Christian community in the action of God, can still travel almost exclusively in the lane of christology. We speak vigorously of Christ but in ways that can easily exhaust the full range of possibilities of "God with us." Christ fills up our hearts, we say. Christ creates unity where there is broken community, Christ makes peace where there is enmity, Christ offers himself to us at the table, and so on. What role, then, is left for the Holy Spirit, except perhaps to bring a "sweet, sweet spirit in this place"? Sometimes we preach as though Christ constantly taunts the Holy Spirit with a ditty from *Annie Get Your Gun*: "Anything you can do, I can do better. I can do anything better than you."[10] The whole story requires a telling not only of the wonders of Christ, but the wonder of the Father and the wonders of the Holy Spirit.

In the gospel story, there is God the Father, but God is called Father only because God has a son. And the Son is called the Son only because he has a parent. OK, well and good, but the relationship Father-Son, and the relationship Son-Father, we get that. But what about the Spirit, and what about relationships defines the Spirit? That's harder to grasp. How do we speak of that?

Imagine an earthly father who has a son, but a son from whom the father is estranged. They haven't talked and haven't seen each other in years. The emotional life between them as father and son has grown cold. Now imagine also a friend who loves them both, a friend who is heart-broken that the father and son have grown distant. So, this friend decides to do what she can to reconnect father and son. She goes to the father, whom she loves, and pleads with him. "Remember that your son is your son, that he is a part of you, that he is a child of your love." Likewise, she reaches out to the son, whom she also loves, reminding him of the father he once loved, the father who once was close and loving toward his son, the father who is not only loving, but loveable. Finally, through the efforts of this friend, father and son are reconciled and the loving relationship restored.

A rough analogy perhaps, but the Spirit plays the part of that friend in the life of the Trinity. Now, in the divine circle, Father and Son have never been estranged, have eternally been in loving relationship, but this is because the Spirit has been eternally interceding between them, always presenting the Father to the Son as the loving Father in whom the Son has life and always presenting the Son to the Father as his Son begotten in love. "So we must learn to think," says Jenson, "the Spirit is indeed the love between two personal lovers, the Father and the Son … [the one] who in his own intention liberates Father and Son to love each other …. The Son adores the Father, but it is the Spirit who shows the Father to the Son … as the available and lovable Father."[11]

Where Do We Enter the Story?

It's a beautiful picture, the life of the Trinity, a web of loving relationships. God the Father has a Son, and the Son has a Father. They both have the Spirit, a lover who liberates Father and Son to love each other. But what difference does this make to us? Very little if the primary purpose of the Christian faith is only to enable us to be better people morally, prepared to engage in the tireless struggles for justice. Then all we need is for Jesus to be a teacher, a sage, who by word and deed shows us an example of righteous living. Indeed, Jesus as sage is a popular view among many progressive Christian. Yes, the Christian faith empowers us to be seekers of justice, but God wishes to give us an even larger gift than moral teachings and example, the gift of God's own life. That happens because God astoundingly wishes to draw us into the very life of the Trinity. Christians work for justice not because of rectitude, but because justice is at the heart of God's life, and we are drawn into that life.

As we are gathered into God's life, we do not become, of course, the fourth member of the Trinity. Our point of entry is through Jesus Christ. As the Book of Hebrews so powerfully portrays it, Jesus says he is not ashamed to call human beings his siblings, for it is true that all humanity has one Father. Hebrews goes on to affirm that Jesus stands in the midst of the Trinity with his arms embracing all human beings and announces, "Here am I and the children whom God has given me" (see Hebrews 2:11-13). John Calvin said that all that Christ did for us is "nothing to us until we grow into one body with him" and that it is by the "secret energy of the Spirit" that Christ's redemption becomes effective for us, the Spirit making it possible that we might receive "the benefits of the salvation which Christ has purchased."[12] Our reception of the full life of God is dependent upon the love of Christ for us and our love for Christ, and a love that is repaired, liberated, and energized by the Holy Spirit.

When the Holy Spirit came to those at Pentecost, it gave the disciples the power to speak in tongues, and it was not the gibberish of fevered and random glossolalia but the word about "God's deeds of power," now accessible in all the languages and to all the peoples gathered in Jerusalem that day. When Peter, emboldened by the Spirit, stood to preach, his sermon shows that, "God's deeds of power," meant nothing less than "Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you" (Acts 2:22). When the hearers, cut to the quick, exclaimed, "What should we do?" Peter significantly responds, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

There it is, the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The Spirit, as a lover, repairs our broken love for God in Christ. Thus, the first command of Peter is "repent," come home to God's love in Christ and be restored. But the Spirit not only repairs us but

sends us forth to live God's promises in Christ. Therefore, Peter's second command is "be baptized," be joined to the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit that you may radiate the life of God in your own life.

When the great teacher of Eastern Orthodoxy at Oxford, Kallistos Ware, looked for guidance about our relationship to the Holy Spirit, he was drawn to a prayer of Saint Symeon, the Byzantine mystical monk, who was called "the New Theologian." He was named "the New Theologian" not because he composed a systematic theology but because he spoke of the immediacy of God in his own experience. To the Holy Spirit, Symeon prayed,

> Come, true light.
> Come, life eternal.
> Come, hidden mystery.
> Come, treasure without name.
> Come, reality beyond all words.
> Come, person beyond all understanding . . .
> Come, unfailing expectation of all who are being saved . . .
> Come, invisible whom none may touch and handle . . .
> Come, for your name fills our hearts with longing and is
> ever on our lips; yet who you are and what your nature
> is, we cannot say or know . . .
> Come, Alone to the alone . . .
> Come, for you are yourself the desire that is within me . . .
> Come, my breath and my life . . .
> Come, my joy, my glory, my endless delight . . .[13]

Ware found in this prayer three significant affirmations about the role of the Spirit in our lives. First, the Spirit is the source of gladness and rejoicing among the faithful. The Spirit is "my joy, my glory, my endless delight." Jürgen Moltmann wrote, "With Easter the laughter of the redeemed, the dance of the liberated, and the creative play of fantasy begins." Moltmann cites Hippolytus' great image that Christ is the leader of the great mystic round-dance, dancing with his bride the Church. Moltmann assures us that this vision is not some otherworldly wish but is a matter of everyday life. How? The "creative Spirit" makes the resurrection of Jesus Christ a present reality to us, and we break out in song, joyful dancing, and holy laughter.[14]

Recently my wife served as a church-appointed mentor for a Presbyterian ministerial candidate from Ghana. When he finished his studies, he was ordained in a service held in a Ghanaian church in Delaware, and my wife was present. At one point in the Presbyterian ordination service, after the candidate kneels for the laying on of hands, the candidate stands again and is formally proclaimed a minister of the gospel with the words, "You are now a minister of Word and Sacrament, in the church of

Jesus Christ." Most Presbyterians observe this moment with reverent silence, but not the Ghanaian congregation. My wife reported that when their friend now stood before them as a newly ordained minister, they burst into spontaneous and joyful song and suddenly rose from the pews and filled the room with free and jubilant dancing. The choreographer of the dance was, of course, the Holy Spirit.

Second, the Spirit as the "unfailing expectation of all who are being saved," makes present to us now the hope of God's promised future. In the words of the old African American spiritual "That Great Gettin' Up Morning," "There's a better day a-comin,' Fare thee well, fare thee well. There's a better day a-comin,' Fare thee well, fare thee well." The Spirit teaches us the truth that there's a better day coming in God's future and liberates us to sing in the middle of a dark and broken world, "Fare thee well."

A few days after Renee Macklin Good, a mother of three, was unmercifully shot and killed in Minneapolis by ICE agent Jonathan Ross—a violent moment in the midst of terror unleashed in the city by federal immigration agents—New Hampshire Episcopal Bishop Rob Hirschfeld joined others in his community for a vigil. When he spoke, he denounced the "cruelty, the injustice, and the horror … unleashed in Minneapolis." Then he turned to specifically address his fellow clergy and told them that, even though he had himself many times signed lofty church statements calling for social justice, "It may be that now is no longer the time for statements, but for us with our bodies to stand between the powers of this world and the most vulnerable."

As some of the ministers present gasped in surprise tinged with fear, Hirschfeld told the clergy to get ready for "a new era of martyrdom." He said they should be sure that their affairs were in order and their wills written. The clergy looked at each other with uncertainty, wondering just what they were hearing from their bishop. Hirschfeld then quickly added that he was not suggesting that they seek out death or martyrdom but instead that their faith be so strong and sure that, as they served God courageously in these convulsive times, they would not fear death.

This confidence in Christ's promise of life in the face of death is of course the work of the Holy Spirit, who makes Christ's promises so real and present to us that we walk through the valley of the shadow of death fearing no evil, knowing that God is with us.

Finally, Ware heard in Saint Symeon's prayer to the Spirit the paradox that the Spirit is as close to us as our hand to our face, "the desire that is within me . . . my breath and my life," and yet, at the same time, is veiled from our sight, the "hidden mystery … treasure without name …reality beyond all words … person beyond all understanding." As for Jesus, we saw him, saw him face-to-face. As John says, "The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14), but the Spirit is as invisible as the wind. Ware says that this paradoxical closeness and hiddenness is because the Holy Spirit is …

> a kenotic Spirit, who hides himself in revealing himself. Ever present, he yet effaces himself; working within us, he adapts himself to us and so remains concealed. With total immediacy we feel his presence and we know his power; yet we do not see his face, for he shows us always the face of Christ (cf. Jn 15:26; 16:13–15). He is a free Spirit, constantly crossing boundaries, not to be controlled and classified, baffling our card indexes and confusing our computers. The wind of the Spirit, as Jesus affirms, "blows where it wishes; you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going" (John 3:8).[15]

Puerto Rican-born church historian and theologian Zaida Maldonado Pérez, underscores this idea that the Spirit blows like the wind, undeterred by boundaries, when she writes in her book *Latina Evangelicas: A Survey From the Margins,* that the Holy Spirit is the "wild child of the Trinity":

> I love the Holy Spirit. She is like the wild child of the Trinity, anywhere and everywhere moving, calling forth, and stirring things up. She is wonderfully illusive yet also fully present. She is untamable, full of possibilities and creative potential. She is the salsa beat in our daily foxtrot. She is and will be unconventional, even uncultured. She is the wonder that moves our questions from, what does this all mean? to, what shall we do? She can forever alter our lives and change our world. She is life-giving breath, wind, and fire. She is the *ruach elohim*, the flaming divine pneuma that is always "going native" because she wants to be encountered by all. She is calming Spirit amid the storm. She is wisdom.

When Dhananjay Jagannathan was working on his PhD in philosophy in Chicago, a friend asked him if he had ever had anything like a religious experience. He quickly answered "no," but then, after a little reflection, said, "I'm not sure."[16] Today Jagannathan, who teaches philosophy at the City University of New York, is a member of a quite unusual New York City choral group, the Renaissance Street Singers. The group sings Renaissance polyphonic compositions of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but they sing not in concert halls but on the street corners and subway stations of New York City. They sing Renaissance works amid the hectic flow of the city. Many people just pass them by, but a fair number stop to absorb the enchanting beauty of the music, sung on the gray streets of New York.

Because their repertoire includes the best music of the era, it is mostly music composed for the Christian Mass. Thus, the group sings frequently of the gospel and of Jesus Christ, but they sing this music because of its musical excellence, not its message. Most of the singers in the Renaissance Street Singers are non-believers. A few are Jewish, but the others are atheists, as was Jagannathan.

Jagannathan, however, was curious about the music he was singing and wanted to know more about the liturgical context for which it was composed. That meant

going to churches to learn, and he learned quickly that his strong tenor voice was a coveted asset in church. He joined a choir. Just to learn, mind you, but then, "Before long, I realized I wasn't there just for the music."

> I tried explaining to people that, while I still considered myself a nonbeliever, it felt important to go to church. I tried pointing to various things churchgoing afforded beyond membership in the choir: a connection to a wider community—especially important for those like me who were prone to being trapped in a university bubble—an opportunity for service to others, time set apart for nonproductive activity. But in reality, I couldn't fully explain it to myself. I felt closer to understanding why when I was singing with others.[17]

Jagannathan gradually became aware that he had grown discontented with the rigid pieties of university culture, where religious belief is automatically dismissed as superstition. This worldview was making less and less sense to him, but he had no good place to turn, no alternative that felt worthy of his deep commitment. But then he saw that singing in a choir in Christian worship was creating a new reality for him. "It took some time for me," he says, "to realize that I was already pursuing that alternative in the Christian communities I was a part of and that I was in fact already committed to it."[18]

The Spirit continued to work in the crevices and places of curiosity in Jagannathan's life, and finally, Dhananjay Jagannathan presented himself for Christian baptism. The wind of the Spirit blows where it will, here opening up to a non-believer singing of Christ on the streets of New York the reality of that very Christ drawn near.

As a continuing part of the Renaissance Street Singers, Jagannathan often sings William Byrd's "Ne irascaris, Domine" on the streets of the city. "I have seen children, pets, people busily striding to their next appointment, and others lazily strolling on a sunny day all come to a halt in wonder," he writes. "One does not need to know Latin to sense the earnestness of Byrd's (and Isaiah's) plea for the restoration of Jerusalem."[19] "As I am often reminded," he continues,

> …we live in a broken city, a desolation for too many of our fellow citizens, in a broken world … But in Byrd's hands, Isaiah's plea is not only urgent, a quiet and insistent prayer, but also a vessel of the hope we need in order to cooperate with God in bringing about his kingdom and his restoration. Each time we sing "Ne irascaris"—and other compositions like it—on the streets, a little of New York City is made beautiful, even sacred, by the joint attention of those who are present. From time to time, I think, we might also make the lives of one or two of those who listen different.[20]

Director Angus MacLachan's small jewel of a film, *A Little Prayer*, is about a dysfunctional family in Winston Salem, North Carolina. Bill, a Vietnam veteran, owns a sheet metal factory and lives in a modest suburban neighborhood with his wife, Venida. Their son, David, a veteran of the Iraq war, works as a manager in the plant, and he and his touchingly gentle and lovely wife Tammy, a young woman raised in humble conditions in the Southern Appalachian mountains, live in a cottage in his parent's back yard. The family, once churchgoers, has ceased to attend. Bill tells Tammy at the breakfast table that he doesn't miss going to church or singing the hymns, but that he does miss the Christmas carols. He then sings quietly, for her but also to himself, a hoarse rendition of the French version of "Un flambeau, Jeanette, Isabelle"

Bring a torch, Jeanette, Isabella
Bring a torch, come swiftly and run.
Christ is born, tell the folk of the village,
Jesus is sleeping in His cradle,
Ah, ah, beautiful is the mother,
Ah, ah, beautiful is her Son.

Life for this family is gradually falling apart. David is unfaithful to Tammy, having an affair with another employee at work, which agonizes Bill because he adores his daughter-in-law. Bill and Venida's youngest, a foul-mouthed daughter with a spoiled daughter of her own, shows up unannounced, having abruptly left her drug-addicted husband in Virginia, and she and her bratty daughter selfishly disrupt family life. Bill, as it turns out, has his own sense of failure as a father, and the family turmoil seems irreparable. "This is the kind of movie where you're on everybody's side," writes film critic Matt Zoller Seitz, "because life is hard and nobody's perfect and none of these characters are irredeemable and you wouldn't wish suffering on anyone who's just out there doing the best they can (maybe on anyone, period). The movie, Seitz says, "prompts you to consider your own imperfections."[21]

As all of this family chaos unfolds, a strange element occurs in the story. On many mornings in Bill and Venida's neighborhood, an ethereal voice, seemingly coming from the sky, can be heard vigorously singing spirituals and other songs that lift the human spirit. One morning, Bill and Tammy walk the neighborhood trying to track down where this mysterious voice comes from, but they can't find the source. The timing and origin of the voice remain a mystery. It seems to come from beyond. "Come, hidden mystery. Come, treasure without name," Symeon prayed to the Holy Spirit.

Family life moves along, but we are not sure where. Perhaps the level of pain will finally erupt and destroy all. Or perhaps they will simply manage one more day with the blend of suffering and hesitant hope found behind the front door of

almost every home. In a moving scene near the end of the film, Bill receives an unexpected phone call at his office. We don't know who has called, we can hear only his end of the conversation, but he seems both surprised and delighted, ending the call with, "Well, OK, I'll meet you there at noon."

It turns out that Tammy was the caller, and she had asked if Bill would like to join her at a local art museum, her request perhaps out of a desire to be with the one member of the family she trusts and loves completely. In the museum, Bill and Tammy move through the galleries. One piece of art particularly arrests them: Frederick Church's "The Andes of Ecuador." The painting situates the viewer in a valley. Two small figures, almost hidden in the bottom left of the painting, are kneeling in prayer in front of an old stone cross. But the perspective of the painting beckons the viewer across the valley to the mountains in the distance, and then to the sun just above the mountain ridge, and ultimately to an infinite expanse of light beyond. The painting evokes metaphorically both the completion of creation in Genesis and the promise of a new creation.

As they look at this scene, Tammy reads from the plaque next to the painting. The painting, it says, is "one grand panorama. The infinite botanical detail, the terrifying depths of the abyss, and the overwhelming sense of unlimited space combine to communicate a powerful sense of the sublime." Tammy confesses that she does not know what "panorama" means, and Bill gently says that "here, it's the whole picture, as far as you can see."

As they leave the museum, Tammy holds up two brown lunch bags she has packed. Bill says he knows just where to go to eat. They enter a nearby forest and follow a nature trail to a wooden bench where they sit down to eat and talk. In the solitude of the forest, father and daughter-in-law speak to each other words of tender affection and loving wisdom. Finally Tammy tells Bill that the mountain folk she grew up with would say that they are "kindred spirits."

They leave the bench, walk farther down the trail, and soon they come to a meadow. On the far end of the meadow there is a break in the trees, and gauzy sunlight streams through. Tammy says in surprise, "Look, an open panorama … right here." The soundtrack begins to play softly "Un flambeau, Jeanette, Isabelle."

To the eyes of faith, "A Little Prayer" is a powerful metaphor for the work of the Holy Spirit, who not only teaches us the grand panorama of God's recreating the heavens and the earth, but also opens up, along the everyday trails we are traveling, in the middle of life's messiness, "an open panorama … right here."

As Peter, swept up in the power of the fire and wind, ended his sermon that Pentecost Day, "You will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him" (Acts 2:38-39).

Notes

1. Ignatios IV (1920-2012) as quoted in Robert Davis Hughes III, "Dust and DNA The Intertwining of Word and Spirit in History and the Trinitarian Life," Radu Bordeianu, ed., *It is the Spirit Who Gives Life: New Directions in Pneumatology* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2022), 214-215.

2. Willie James Jennings, *Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 32

3. *Ibid.*

4. Robert W. Jenson, *A Theology in Outline: Can These Bones Live?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 41-42.

5. This paragraph is guided by the wonderful essay by Kallistos Ware, "The Holy Spirit in the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom," in Bordeianu, *It is the Spirit Who Gives Life*," 94.

6. Jenson, *A Theology in Outline,* 48.

7. Herbert McCabe, OP, *God Still Matters* (New York: *Continuum*, 2002), 42.

8. Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*(New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 46.

9. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 19913), 64.

10. See Frank Macchia, *Baptized in the Spirit: A Global Pentecostal Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 116.

11. Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1*, 156

12. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* edited by John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.1.1, 537-538.

13. Symeon the New Theologian, "Mystical Prayer," in *Hymnes* 1–15, ed. Johannes Koder, S*ources Chretiennes* 156 (Paris: Cerf, 1969), 150–4; English translation by Kallistos Ware, "An Invocation to the Holy Spirit," *Eastern Churches Review* 5, no. 2 (1973), 113–114.

14. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 110-111.

15. Ware, "The Holy Spirit in the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom," 90-91.

16. Dhananjay Jagannathan, "Preaching to the Choir: How Sacred Music Led Me to Christian Faith, *Commonweal,* 152/11 (December, 2025), 43

17. Ibid., 45.

18. Ibid., 46.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Matt Zoller Seitiz, "A Little Prayer, "https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/a-little-prayer-david-strathairn-movie-review-2025

Sermon: "Beyond Comfort, Growing Into Your Purpose"

Annanda Barclay
Sunnyvale, California

This sermon was preached on June 8, 2025, at Sunnyvale Presbyterian Church

My body, and my spirit are beginning to feel yet again tired
Of being under the weight
Of an all too familiar star-spangle bannered boot sole
Supported by an all too familiar American boot strap.

Now since this is a diverse crowd, thanks be to God,
Let me be clear that my tired isn't your tired,
And your tired isn't my tired,
but nonetheless there is a weariness that enough of us are experiencing.
Ya'll turn to your neighbor on the left with the tiredness you feel and say, "I'm tired"

I know my tiredness from my body and spirit
Comes from my life experience, my epistemology or way of knowing,
And so this morning I can only articulate my experience from who I am
And the histories of the people from whom I come.

As expansive and as limiting as they may be,
They are yours for strong consideration,
And I ask you to consider, maybe the reason why DEI is so threatening
Has as much to do with the accessible knowledge of diverse people
Who are able to articulate, identify, and out of necessity, already have
Strategies of overcoming, and ways of being to combat American Fascism
Because they have already lived under it within the borders of this country.

And they are betting on, us bringing the xenophobia,
Standing silently with and on the caste systems from
Our own cultures to be in service of the White Christian Nationalist Agenda
Which they always already act upon with the loudest silence possible.

So this morning when I talk about my experience, my culture, my knowledge,
Don't get it twisted, I'm not here to deny your people or experience
I'm not here to put the experience of Black people,
specifically African-Americans, above the experience of others.

As a Good Christian I know and truly believe the Gospel is rooted
in solidarity with all people, all life
And yet I can only share what I know through the experience of
This Black, queer, cis, female, body.

I'm tired. And I come from a people
who for the past 400 years have been sick and tired.

In 1936, Langston Hughes, wrote,

"We [Black folks] in America do not have to be told what Fascism is in action. We know. Its theories of Nordic supremacy and economic suppression have long been realities to us."

What we are seeing today, right now in our country, is not new,
it's quite old and painfully familiar to more than enough people,

So, for the sake of honoring
the sobering historical context of the birth of the church this morning,
Which I will get to in a minute,
I will go ahead and say the quiet parts out loud.

Yes we are at spiritual war.
And yes we are fighting a fascist government.
Yes, many people will disappear.
Yes, too many people will die.
No, you are not as safe as you would like to be or thought that you were.

Separating yourselves from this first wave of people who are being targeted,
Latino immigrants, trans people, native americans, black people,
queers, the disabled, poor women, and women of color,

Will not save you.

And let's be honest.
As a society, and here in Sunnyvale,
We are all too comfortable with these populations
being poor, unhoused, over policed, and normatively undereducated,
Marked as human shields for the "good" of the alleged "whole" of our empire.
Their personal suffering is normal and expected.
Their perseverance and achievement is our perplexity and surprise.

The church was birthed in a time where Early Christians and messianic Jews
were genuinely afraid of their local government and the Roman Empire
Due to the policing, torture, and crucifixion of Jesus,
Executed by the Roman Empire at the persistence of his local government.

This is why when I hear Christians sometimes mention
"Church is not a place for politics," I get concerned.

Jesus was crucified by the Roman Empire in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.
If it is a Jesus you want without the politics of the day,
there are plenty of churches who will teach you,

a shallow theology, and hollow gospel.
Satan is more than happy to welcome you to a feel-good empty fellowship.

What we are seeing in Los Angeles,
what we have been witnessing in cities across the country
over these past months,
is not an America that has never been.
It is an America that has always been.

My parents, when they were children and teenagers
Remember the National Guard deployed in their Black urban Neighborhoods
of Chicago and Newark, New Jersey.
My Cousins, Aunties and Uncles of their age
Remember the US Army Tanks pointed at houses in their Black neighborhoods.

So when I get the news updates on my phone
When I turn on my computer
When I watch my television screen
To see and hear what is happening to predominantly our Latine immigrant siblings
Several of whom, when the borders of the United States expanded westward
The border crossed them,

When I see the history
of just one generation before me repeating itself
Targeting a different people group
Not because people targeted in the past are no longer *en vogue*
But because there are not enough of them anymore
To fight back in numbers the way our siblings in LA are fighting back now

It begs the honest reflection that …

If we are the Church that we say we are,
When it comes to migrants and immigrants in our country
When it comes to trans people
When it comes to Black people
When it comes to the targets of empire

I quote the great Baptist Preacher Prethea Hall,
"Who are they to you,
in your ministries of teaching and preaching and care?
And who are you to them?"

Pentecost
The birth of the Church
Happens at a moment when Christ's followers are scared
Jesus is no longer with them and has ascended on the throne
through our receiving of the Holy Spirit

It is an apocalyptic moment, meaning it is a moment of the end of an era
The age being the time that God dwelt amongst us as one of us.
So much so that Peter quotes the Prophet Joel Acts 2:14-21,
Who biblical scholars agree is an apocalyptic prophet,
Just as the author identified as John was an apocalyptic prophet
In the Book of Revelation.

People have survived apocalypses,
Not without scars, but people have thrived and survived after apocalypses
After terrors so awful they marked an end of an era where there was no going back.
Pentecost was an apocalyptic event
And on our birthday as the Church, we are in the midst of another.
Sometimes I think we as Christians cling to a falsehood

that life is fair and that we are owed comfort
without accountability for how and by whom our comforts are serviced.
What is the cost to life for our comfort?
There should be little to none.

The Holy Spirit coming to the early Christians
in their time of justifiable fear and concern
Was to bring the comfort of equipment
To have to the tools necessary be followers of Christ teachings
In an age when Jesus no longer walks amongst us.

Make no mistake,
just as the maturing of the Church
came with the blessing of the power of the Holy Spirit,
So did a spiritual maturation happen to those who received God's Spirit.

In other words, I say this to myself as well,
Spiritually speaking beloveds, it's time to grow up and meet the moment.
What is happening is not going anywhere and this is just the beginning.

The Holy Spirit has no bounds on race, class, gender, or ability.
The time we live in now is a clarion call to build the muscles of body and spirit
So that the Holy Spirit can use us as vessels
Just like the Holy moment of tongues.

In order to build muscle and become strong
Our muscle fibers have to rip.
They must go through an appropriate time of discomfort and pain
In order to strengthen and meet the weight demands given them by the body.
Oppression and political repression is a terrible, heavy weight.

That in order to lift with the help of the Holy Spirit
Your heart must tear … just enough
So that you can move beyond comfort and grow into your purpose

To lift the heavy weight of life
And meet the moment the demand of what it means to earnestly be a Christian at this time.

Your heart needs to tear … just enough at the reality that
"Rising white nationalism, racist violence, xenophobia,
and economic deterioration of the working class,
Has prepared the way for the current iteration of our American Empire, an imminent reality."

Your heart needs to tear … just enough to know
That Fascism, as Historian Robin D.G. Kelly puts it,
"is not some aberration, from the march of progress,
It is the logical development Western civilization itself.
It is the logical development of
A civilization based on racial classification and hierarchy,
A civilization based on colonial domination, capitalist exploitation and violence."

Your spiritual heart, needs to tear a little
So that it can grow back stronger
To help support and lift the weight of these perilous times
Of all the awful things being done in the name of our Christ Jesus and God
So that we might put an end to the legacies of hate that we didn't ask for.

The Fascist state exists to protect those who are the people
and eradicate those who are not considered the people.
So in this respect, fascism is not at odds with liberal democracy.
Which is in part why what is happening right now is so scary

For the parts of ourselves that are scared,
I propose to you this:

What is happening in our country is nothing new
the part of you that is scared,
is the part of you that has always been
unsafe or suspect at times anyway.

The difference is the veneer has worn off
and you cannot ignore the tarnish as you once did.

If God, through the resurrection of Jesus the Christ,
fought the duel with death and won,
If you believe that the victory is actually already yours,
Turn to your neighbor on your right
And say, with the help of the Holy Spirit we'll get through

Part of what's happening is
the Roman Empire of our time believes in eugenics,

Meaning they believe in human diversity as a fixed
immutable hierarchy, where some groups are not suitable
for freedom or self rule precisely because of their genetic make up.

And these people, because they are not like "us"
Are considered inherently less than and required to be ruled over
stripped of any federal recognition or legal protections.

Which is not only a culture and governance of apartheid,
but lack of recognition in combination with lack of legal protections
is the definition of genocide
according to the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention.

For some of us this American reality
has been a permanent fixture of life.
For some of us that wonder why our country
won't name genocides elsewhere
It's in part because our country would implicate itself
In long-standing and recent genocides here at home.

Fascism is always a war against life.

And America has always been at this war.

Lest we forget,
that the Nazi party based its eugenics roots and practices from our Jim Crow.
Hitler was fascinated at how our country
could be a democracy for freedom and justice for all
and yet maintain apartheid.
We were his blueprint.

So we need to build muscle in community just as the early church did.
We need healthy debates to figure out
not if we are included in solidarity with one another
But *how* to be in solidarity with one another,
while honoring the obvious diversity reflected in our shared humanity,

Which is in part why the day and season of Pentecost
Is a day to join in the tongues of fire throughout the ages,
To live a lifestyle of compassionate actions of care
And solidarity partnerships with all people and life,
For our mutual liberation as Jesus taught and lived.
That is the only reason we call ourselves Christians
Or compel others to follow Christ's ways.

Historian Robin D.G. Kelley said in a recent lecture
"It is so easy to blame the right.
Defeating the kind of fascism we face now

requires something deeper than defeating
the current administration or winning elections
it requires a deeper ideological shift."

I argue, it requires a *Pentecost*.

It means to go to the root of the crosses we bear,
and the people we crucify.
It means we need to always fight in solidarity with others
as though our lives depended on it,
because they actually do.

It means pleading allegiance to the kin-dom of God, and all God's creation
which God from the beginning proudly proclaimed was good.
It means standing up for oppressed life everywhere
and like Jesus not asking for anything in return.
That is what solidarity means.

You don't get brownie points for solidarity;
As a Christian it's what you're supposed to do
Like cleaning your room or washing your body,
It is a part of your spiritual hygiene

In these Evil times
As we deal with these all too familiar demons of old
Remember The Holy Spirit is heard in every tongue, every language
Through love and compassion.

Remember You were born for these times just as you are
Because you are here to live them.

Let us go about doing the work Jesus
and the Holy Spirit on Pentecost call us to do,
And give the Church a birthday we will never forget.
Amen.

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Sermon: "The Trinity"

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> *"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you."*
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> - John 16:12-15

Most of us, if we're honest, treat the Trinity like a gift we never really figured out how to use. We nod reverently when it's mentioned in prayers and worship. We recognize the words and sometimes stumble over them. But we aren't really sure why the idea of one-in-three and three-in-one matters or what it means for our faith. Our sanctuaries are filled with images of "three,"and worship is clothed in the language of Father, Son, and Spirit and metaphors of the Triune life. We are reminded of and drawn into the Holy Mystery in countless ways. Yet for all that, we often miss the meaning of this idea called the Trinity.

I was reminded recently that Trinity Sunday has earned a reputation as a preacher's nightmare. In other words, if I was smart, I would have scheduled vacation for this Sunday, or maybe a trinitarian hymn sing. I mean, how do you make sense of something that seems to defy logic? 1 + 1 + 1 = *1*. It feels more like quantum physics than good news. Yet, here's what I want to suggest: the Trinity is not a logic puzzle; it is a meaningful way to understand God's nature and God's activity for and with us. It is a mystery that comes from scripture, and from the language of Jesus, that describes the God in whom we live and move and have our being.

Christian theologians, almost from the beginning, have worked to understand what Jesus says about himself, the Father, and the Spirit. The Trinity is simply an effort to work out the meaning of what Jesus says and what happens to him. Jesus himself points toward this mystery in our text today. He tells his disciples that the Spirit will continue his ministry, glorifying him and the Father. Jesus describes a mutuality of divine relationship—but he doesn't explain it. He simply says it. The doctrine of the Trinity is our attempt to understand what he's saying, an effort to create language that can articulate the nature of the Infinite God seen in the face of Jesus.

So, instead of shying away from the Trinity, I want to commit an "act of theology." I want to share a few analogies that have been used to illuminate how God's love overflows in the Three Persons, Father, Son, and Spirit. As I do this, I'll use the language of "Father" because that's what Jesus uses. But please remember that this is

only language and metaphor. God is a person, but God is not a man. God is a personal being, who is like a Mother and a Father to us all.

So, for three analogies, let me start with one that has ancient roots. Tertullian in the second century, and John of Damascus in the eighth century, both used this image. It's not perfect. All analogies break down and collapse under the weight of the mystery; but it does lead us closer.[1]

Think of the Father as the Sun (in the sky)—the source of all light and energy. Everything begins there. The Son (S "o" n) is like the rays of the sun—the same essential light reaching us in a form we can receive. Without the rays, the sun would still be there, but distant and hidden from us. The rays bring the essence of the sun to us. The Spirit is like the warmth of the sun, the power that makes these rays of light not just illuminating but warming, life-giving, effective, and transforming for us.

Sun, rays, and warmth. The same divine essence and yet three distinct ways of experiencing God's love and being. They are not three separate things, but three related expressions of the same thing. One reality that reaches us in three ways. The Father's love has the character of source and origin and fount. The Son's love carries the warmth of incarnation, of relatability, of God-with-us. The Spirit's love has the quality of intimacy, of experience, and effect. Three distinct expressions of one overflowing love.

Tertullian's analogy helps us see that God's love doesn't stay contained in a distant heaven. It travels. God's love reaches us in God's Son. God's love warms us, embraces us, and transforms us by God's Spirit.

That's the first analogy. Are you still with me? Let's take a step forward with the next one. This is from Karl Barth, perhaps the most influential theologian of the twentieth century. He, like that other great Reformed theologian John Calvin, was suspicious of Trinity analogies. Like Calvin, he worried they could mislead us or too easily break down under scrutiny, which they often do. But Barth did use this one, and he was a theologian of the Word, so it is fitting.[2]

Think of the Father as the Speaker. The Father is the one who has something essential to say. The Son is the Word. Jesus is God's Word to us, embodied, made tangible, spoken into human history, with context and story. The Spirit is the Interpreter—the one who makes that Word personally intelligible, meaningful, and relevant to our lives. Father, Son, Spirit. Speaker, Word, Interpreter.

The analogy of an interpreter reminds me of a day last year when I was at a mission conference in Montreat, North Carolina, with our PC(USA) mission co-worker, John McCall. I and other local pastors spent the day in conversations with Taiwanese pastors, learning about their ministries and sharing about our own contexts. John was the interpreter for the group.

During the afternoon, John, and I, and a Taiwanese pastor went for a long walk through Montreat. As we walked and talked, John interpreted. He was converting words from English to Mandarin and back again—and doing so much more. He cap-

tured tone and meaning, helped us understand not just what each of us was saying, but also the background information we needed, and added his own experiences and thoughts. He was both a full partner in the conversation and a faithful interpreter facilitating our relationship. He was the glue that made the relationship work.

That's how it is with the Spirit. The Spirit doesn't just connect us to God. The Spirit makes God's love personally meaningful and relevant to our lives and circumstances. When Jesus tells his disciples here in John, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now," he's pointing to the Spirit's work. God doesn't overwhelm us with more than we can handle or send us resources and leave us alone to sort it out. The Spirit guides us gradually into truth we can actually receive and live.

When you're struggling to pray, when the words won't come, when you feel you're spiritually empty, the Spirit is interpreting your wordless feelings to the Father. When you read scripture or sit in worship and suddenly a familiar passage or line of a song or thought in a sermon speaks to your situation in a new way, the Spirit is doing interpretive work. When you find yourself moved to compassion for someone you previously dismissed, when you feel that your heart is getting softer, the Spirit is working Christ's love into your heart.

You see, the Trinity is not abstract theology. The Trinity describes the mechanics of grace, how God's love operates in the world, in your life, in a community of faith. The Father is the Speaker. The Son is the Word. The Spirit interprets and makes relevant and real.

Now, if you're still with me, let's take one more step, with a third way to think about the Trinitarian mystery. This one may feel more contemporary, even though it's ancient: Lover, Beloved, and Love.[3]

We like to say that "God is love." That's biblical, from the first letter of John. And … it actually requires the Trinity. Here's why: love isn't a stand-alone thing. Love needs a relationship. You can't have love in isolation; you only have love in a relationship. You need someone who loves and something to love. This means that God cannot *be* love, in God's own very self, if God exists in isolation as a unitary being, because love needs an object, a recipient, a beloved. If God is truly love, if love is the essence of the divine being, not just something God does but who God is, then God must be relational from the very beginning. God must be a relationship in God's very self.

So, think about it this way: the Father is the Lover, the one who desires to love someone, something. The Son is the Beloved, the perfect object of the Father's love, the one who receives and responds to the Father's love completely. The Spirit is the Love itself, the relationship, the bond, the connection that flows between them.

This metaphor depicts so well the lively and personal God we find in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. The God of the Bible isn't a philosopher's God, living in a static state, in some kind of divine loneliness at the top of the universe, ruling from splendid isolation. The God revealed in scripture, seen in the face of Jesus, is a personal God, a being in relationship, who chooses to be in relationship.

Before there was anything else, before there was even creation, from eternity, a relationship of love was circulating in the life of God: The Father loving the Son. The Son responding to the Father. The Spirit as the love that binds them together and the life they share. Creation doesn't happen because God is lonely. Creation happens because God's love is so overflowing, so abundant, it spills out into making worlds and creatures and people. We are the recipients of the overflowing life of love within the Triune God. The classic line that captures this in the creation story of Genesis 1 is when God says, "Let us make humankind in our image, in our likeness ... So in the image of God, he created them. God created them male and female." Creation is the result of the overflowing love of the divine life.

Now, I must confess that this can feel esoteric. The headlines of any given week can make a sermon on the Trinity feel like very poor timing. Why speculate about the nature of divine being in a world like this? We should rather lament war in the Middle East or anywhere, as bombs fall on hospitals and children, and we should pray for peace. We should lament political violence, the murder of legislators and mass shootings, and pray for justice and for mutual understanding to take root in our own nation. We should speak up for vulnerable neighbors and strangers, for every person who deserves to be treated with the dignity of God's image, no matter how they made it across a border or when.

And while any of this can make Trinity Sunday feel like poor timing, the Trinity is not just idle speculation. Because this is what the Trinity shows us: God's own life reveals that power does not translate to mean domination, that authority can be shared rather than hoarded, that mutual life and flourishing is the goal of creation. The Father doesn't lord it over the Son. The Son doesn't compete with the Spirit for influence. The Spirit doesn't manipulate the other two with power games. Instead, there is mutuality, a genuinely shared life, and love overflowing toward creation.

When we witness hatred and violence dominating our news cycles, we're seeing the opposite of trinitarian life. The Trinity gives us both a critique of the world as it is—where "might makes right" or fear drives relationships—and a vision of the world as God intends it, where love flows freely and power serves the flourishing of all. The Trinity isn't idle theory. It's a vision of life and a description of what is *most really real*.

Lover, Beloved, and Love is the essence of the God in whom we live and move and have our being, and therefore a description of the deepest and most important truth we know.

Our language will always be groping after the truth. God—the *Living* God—will always be bigger than we can describe, and out beyond what our minds can comprehend. Yet, we are strengthened and nourished and enlightened when we seriously consider what God has revealed about God's nature. These three analogies for understanding the Trinity help us take one or two or three steps forward in faith. Sun, Rays, and Warmth. Speaker, Word, Interpreter. Lover, Beloved, and Love. They help us

understand the God we worship, and make some sense of how and why Jesus talks about the Father and the Spirit in the way he does.

Three analogies, and there are many more, but none of them is enough. Legend has it that St. Augustine told a story about walking along the beach and seeing a young child who had dug a hole in the sand. The child kept running to the ocean, filling a small bucket with water, and pouring it into the hole. Augustine asked the child what he was doing. "I'm trying to put the ocean in this hole," came the reply.[4] That, of course, is silly. But Augustine realized he was doing the same thing with his theology: trying to pour the infinite mystery of God, word by word, into the small hole of human language and understanding.

Ultimately, we just can't. We will never grasp the mystery completely; we can only point to it. We can wade into it, like an ocean of mercy and love. We can let it shape how we worship, how we live, the vision we have for our lives, for the world, and the future. Because the Trinity is not a logic puzzle. The Trinity is a gift to receive as we seek to worship the God whose life we are invited to share, now and forever.

Amen.

Notes

1. Tertullian (c. 160-220 AD) used the illustration of the sun, the sun's rays, and the warmth which it produces. St. John of Damascus (c. 675-749 AD) explicitly states: "The Father is a sun with the Son as rays and the Holy Ghost as heat." See St. John of Damascus, An Exposition of the Orthodox Faith, Book I, Chapter 8. English translation available at New Advent: https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/33041.htm

2. Karl Barth developed the concept of the Word of God in threefold form (revelation, scripture, and proclamation) as an analogy to the Trinity in Church Dogmatics I/1. Barth understood the Trinity in terms of revelation: the Father as Revealer (Speaker), the Son as Revelation (Word spoken), and the Holy Spirit as the effect of revelation (making the Word known/interpreted to us). See Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, Volume I/1: The Doctrine of the Word of God, §8-12, edited by G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark).

3. Augustine of Hippo, De Trinitate (On the Trinity), Book VIII. Augustine writes: "when I, who make this inquiry, love anything, there are three things concerned—myself, and that which I love, and love itself … Therefore there are three things: he who loves, and that which is loved, and love." Available at New Advent: https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/130108.htm.

4. This is a medieval legend about St. Augustine, not found in his own writings or contemporary accounts. The story became popular in medieval hagiography and art. One of the earliest visual representations appears in Benozzo Gozzoli's fifteenth-century fresco series on the life of St. Augustine in the church of Sant' Agostino, San Gimignano, Italy. While the story is not historically verified, it effectively illustrates the mystery of attempting to comprehend the infinite nature of the Trinity with finite human understanding.

What The Gift of the Holy Spirit At Pentecost Means

Charles Johnson
Dallas, Texas

My dean of the theology school at my seminary in Louisville when I studied there in the early 1980s tells the story of sitting on a bench one day overlooking the greens, what we sardonically called the "Josephus Bowl," when he spotted me making my way across the vast lawn for class. I had on cut-off jeans, a T-shirt, and flip-flops, had long, shaggy hair, and was puffing on a cigarette perched jauntily in the corner of my mouth. He turned to a friend sitting with him and said, "Would you look at Johnson? Just look at him. Why, there goes the future of the Southern Baptist Convention!"

As we celebrate Pentecost, we might imagine the angels looking at Peter that fateful day long ago and saying incredulously, "There goes the future of the Church of Jesus Christ." Peter is anything but the "Rock" that Jesus nicknames him. He is the least likely candidate to lead anybody's movement, much less the incipient church. But, that is exactly whom Jesus taps as the one to launch this new organization of love.

Impatient Peter, who jumped out of the boat only to find himself sinking when he took his eyes off the prize. Intemperate Peter, who brandished his sword in a split second in the Garden of Gethsemane, forgetting everything his Lord taught him about non-violent resistance. Insecure Peter, who lost his nerve when confronted by the young girl on the streets of Jerusalem, betraying Jesus three times more than Judas ever did, and the third time so emphatically that he used an obscenity to underscore his denial. Hell didn't have to endeavor to shake Peter. A peasant girl did the trick nicely.

But, amazingly, Peter does make good on the name Jesus gave him, and part of what this season of Pentecost is all about is the way Peter finds his true identity. At Pentecost, Peter stands up bravely in the town square he wouldn't be caught dead in at Passover. His eyes stay clearly focused on the One who knows him best and loves him most, enabling him finally to understand that the Jesus movement isn't just for those in the club, for those who fit the bill, for those who know the secret code, but for everyone who dares to call upon the name of the Lord. Because Peter got the core inclusiveness of the Gospel, we are in the Jesus movement today. So, when Jesus names Peter "Rock," he sees more in Peter than Peter sees in himself. Jesus is good at that kind of thing.

So, the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost provides us at least two grace gifts that do not come naturally to humans, equality and community. What the Holy Spirit taught Peter during those formative Pentecostal days of his initial ministry, is what

we are learning and experiencing in our own ministries today. Pentecost 2026 finds us challenged anew to accept God's gifts of human equality and community, and to affirm and apply these gifts in practical ways in our own preaching and leading. The future dynamism and relevance of the Jesus movement is dependent on us trusting the Holy Spirit to receive these gifts and make them a living reality.

Equality

The human condition confines us to an egocentric predicament. We are deceived into thinking ourselves better than others. Nowhere is this distortion more virulently rooted than in our systems of patriarchy.

Over against this human disease, the Holy Spirit affirmed through Peter and the apostles that the new Pentecostal movement would be led by women, just as the Hebrew Scriptures foretold and Jesus taught.

Now, blessedly, this is a more settled matter in some faith traditions than in others. Readers of this journal know instinctively which churches are more open to the female voice in the sacrament of preaching and which still keep those female voices silent. I represent a Baptist tradition, even a "progressive" one, that sill has a long, long way to go before women are accorded equal access to the pulpit of God with men. I imagine even those of you from more egalitarian traditions see patterns of patriarchy that are hard to break.

A quick theological survey of biblical feminine is instructive. The first thing we learn about God in the creation story is that the image of God is both male and female. In Genesis 1.27 the Scripture reports that God made the human in God's image and likeness. What is that image? The rest of the verse answers that question: "male and female, God created them." This is a remarkable thing for that Yahwist to write. But the Elohist, writing in a completely different temporal and cultural context, also picks up on this theme in the second chapter of Genesis, where we find that the concept of mutuality and partnership between the genders is at the core of God's Will for humanity. The human is isolated and alone—an egocentric predicament. God ingeniously and colorfully creates another human, an equal creature. The two enjoy a side by side—not under/over—relationship with each other.

The early Bible stories in Torah recapitulate this mutuality over and over again, even in the male-dominant culture out of which it came. Sarah is a faithful matriarch, every bit as much as Abraham is a patriarch. It is Sarah who allows God to fertilize her post-menopausal womb, thus making good on God's promise that God's people would be more numerous than the stars. It is Hagar's faithfulness, over against Abraham's cowardice, that ensures a great people of God would come from him as well as from Isaac. It is Rebecca's cleverness—not Isaac's—that guards that lineage of blessing. Leah and Rachel stories are as compelling, and as critical to the conveyance of blessing, as Jacob stories. It is those brave Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who disobey Pharaoh's command to kill the Hebrew

baby boys, a civil disobedience that forms the foundation of the coming nation of Israel. In a stunning neutralization of the powers and principalities by the loving Providence of God, it is Pharaoh's daughter herself who intervenes and saves the life of Moses. Even in the male-controlled day of ancient antiquity, women are key to God's salvation story in the world.

Fast forwarding to the Christian movement, women are at the center of our Lord's ministry. Mary and Martha provide the home base of Jesus's operations. Mary the Mother of Jesus is, next to our Lord himself, the hero of the Christian faith. Jesus frequently told stories about women and related to women as equals. God is like a woman, Jesus says, in Luke 15, who searches her entire house until she finds the one lost coin. Jesus forms an open, public relationship with the woman at the well of Samaria, something unheard of for a self-respecting Jewish man of Jesus's day to do, and that very woman becomes the first evangelist in the Gospel of John. These faithful women among the disciples of Jesus were the last ones at the Cross, well after the twelve had forsaken Jesus and fled for their lives. All four gospels report that the very first witnesses to the resurrection of Christ are women.

It is the assertive leadership of Lydia that saves Paul's Macedonian mission to carry the radical and universal message of Jesus beyond the narrow cultural confines of Hebrew faith to the Gentiles peoples of the entire known world. God raised up this competent Greek woman to underwrite and resource the missionary movement of Paul. Lydia's prominence and wealth as an educated community leader and businesswoman in the vibrant cities of Philippi and Thyatira were huge assets for Paul. Acts 16.14 says that she listened to Paul as he preached that fateful Sabbath day, meaning that she was educated and understood clearly the religious claims that Paul was making. She was a merchant in fine cloth, material only purchased and utilized by the affluent of Thyatira, which meant that she was very well-connected in that Macedonian culture. When she heard the gospel, she and her entire household were baptized, meaning that she asserted headship and leadership in her family. It was common in that day for the religion of the entire family system—a broad network of extended family and economic relationships—to adopt the religious convictions of the head of that household. That is exactly what happened that day when Lydia and her entire household were baptized. At her generous invitation, Paul and Silas set up their base of operations in her home, and the second missionary movement of Paul was successful because of Lydia's leadership. Furthermore, when Paul and Silas are jailed and released several days later, they make a beeline to Lydia's house so that they can receive her advocacy, solidarity, and support once more.

The gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost sets the stage for Lydia's critical role. Peter announces that the Holy Spirit has now fulfilled the Hebrew prophetic vision: "Your sons and daughters will prophesy, Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy … and whoever calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved" (Acts 2.17-18).

So, tough questions still remain for some congregations of God: Will we submit to the pastoral leadership of women in sacrament of word and table? Will we repent of our disobedience before God in refusing to entrust our pulpits to the women God has called to announce the Good News? Do we trust the Holy Spirit enough to call as our pastors the very women we have trained in our seminaries to prepare for the preaching ministry? Are we willing to adjust our notions of local church autonomy so that we will actively recommend and advocate women to the churches as prospective pastors?

Progressive churches may shrug this off as old news, but I suspect the categorial equality of women in the church remains the pivotal issue in the long march toward full human flourishing.

I pray for the day soon when the church will make good on the Pentecostal promise that young women as well as young men will preach the Good News in partnership one with another, will repent of its cultural confinement, and will open itself to the leadership of God's Spirit in calling women as well as men to serve as Shepherds of the flock.

This Pentecost, let us proclaim this justice for women and men as partners in the life of the church. Let's provide a place for the empowerment of little girls as well as little boys to grow in the grace and nurture of God, and to become all God means for them to be. Let's be a truly Pentecostal church that raises up a new generation of Lydias to liberate the Gospel from its cultural captivity so that the Good News can spread to the whole world.

Community

Community is at the heart of the Christian experience. If Pentecost means anything, it means we cannot properly belong to Christ until and unless we are rightly related to the community of Christ.

The word itself—community—means "unity with." It implies the integration and joining of oneself to a web of relationships outside of the self. To commune with Christ is to enjoy a unity with him, an intersubjectivity with the Risen Lord through which you can no longer discern where you end and Christ begins. It is this oneness, this communing, that is the goal of any authentic Christian pilgrimage.

God and humans alike need this communing one with another. The foundational biblical understanding of the human is that she and he is made in the very image of God, in God's very likeness, so that the human can have relationship with God and God with the human. The poet James Weldon Johnson put it memorably in his famous poem when he has God saying, "I'm lonely. I'll make me a world." Being Itself decided graciously to call creation to the joy of being too.

Descartes didn't quite get it when he asserted *cogito ergo sum*, "I think, therefore, I am." Long before we are rational beings, we are relational beings. I relate, therefore, I am. To be is to be with.

According to the wonderful story of creation, the first man and the first woman are made of the selfsame substance—literally one of the other—so that they can commune with each other. Only "bone of bone and flesh of flesh" has a natural and instinctive way of being with each other. Because all creation proceeds from one unifying and creative Source, we have a primal relation with each other. Properly understood, everyone on the planet is an integral part of one vast human global family. In Dr. King's words, we are all "bound together in a single strand of destiny." We are all kin.

New Testament Christianity is about a community of persons convened by the Holy Spirit around the confession of Jesus as our crucified and risen Lord and Christ. The Gospels are accounts of the central figure of Jesus, but are also remarkably focused on the persons encountered by Jesus. They are comprised not only of the teachings of Jesus, but also of the reactions, testimonies, and responses of those who came into contact with Jesus and dared to follow him. The very first thing Jesus did when he began his ministry was to convene a ragtag group of followers called disciples, and make a merry band of friends out of this unlikely group. The respective Gospel accounts treat Jesus's life from the particular standpoint of the respective and diverse Christian communities. Indeed, these communities wrote their biographies of Jesus to reflect their own precise communal situation. It is interesting to note that, with the exception of Mary, who is the first witness and evangelist of the resurrection, Christ's post-resurrection appearances are always to the disciples as a group. Jesus rises again for the church.

Two-thirds of the New Testament is made up of letters by key pastoral figures to seminal communities seeking to live together in prayer and worship and service around the vision of Christ. These letters address in remarkably honest and practical ways how frail human beings can live together with each other in families of faith that go by the name and story of Jesus. Paul is especially brilliant in explicating these matters of community. He uses a clear metaphor called the Body of Christ in defining and describing the community. We are interlocking and interrelated parts of the same body, functioning naturally and interdependently one with another. Issues such as conflict resolution, reconciliation, peacemaking, authority, and unity are treated in frequent and precise detail. It is of major importance that the majority of the New Testament writings center on the construction and preservation of communal—not individual—faith.

From the standpoint of the Bible, community is necessity if you want to know God and cultivate a rich and vital relationship with that God. To be is to be with. We are placed by Christ in a new family, the new community of God, not defined by biology or by nationality or by ethnicity, but by love. We are placed in relationship with each other because we are in relationship with God.

As a white, privileged Southerner, I was taught my family lineage and history going back many generations. I grew up with a great cloud of Johnson forebears. My

father carefully told stories about my grandmothers and grandfathers, and I know that family heritage like the back of my hand. Some nights of my childhood, it was as if my grandfathers were all sitting at our very supper table. My own father was named after my great grandfather's great grandfather, a young lieutenant in the Revolutionary Army who was killed in a battle with the British in South Carolina. Our ancestral home still stands in Alabama. Checkered and deeply stained, I have spent much of my own life coming to terms with my enslaver family history and heritage. I say often, when asked why I do public education advocacy, that my granddaddies owned slaves, and I have a lot of making up to do.

But my biological family doesn't ultimately define, identify, order, or shape me. Because of the Holy Spirit convening and connecting us, I have another family, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a New Community. I have another set of fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, siblings. I've been adopted into this family. It's like I've been born all over again. The home of this family is "not made with human hands, eternal in the heavens" (2 Cor 5.1). This family goes by another name, a "name which is above every name" (Phil 2.9).

In the 1950s, the Baptist prophet Clarence Jordan was preaching at Ridgecrest Baptist Assembly in North Carolina on the biblical imperative of racial harmony, integration, and reconciliation. It was quite a radical word for that day, or our day for that matter. He spoke of the great community of Christ across every race, and how we are born into this family only by faith, how this new community makes kinspersons of folks from vastly different backgrounds. He spoke of the imperative of the church to be an interracial community. After the benediction, the congregation was astir. It was obvious that the sermon was not particularly well-received by the all white, southern congregation. A matronly woman, coiffured within an inch of her life, approached Clarence afterwards, wagged her bejeweled finger in his face and said, "I'll have you know, Dr. Jordan, I wasn't born to associate with *those people*!" Clarence thought for a moment before replying, breathed for the Holy Spirit to come over him, and then gently said with a smile, "Well, Madam, I suggest you just need to be born again."

We've accepted the invitation of the Holy Spirit to a great new community. The Spirit has convened us here from all our respective individual places and backgrounds, races and classes, denominations and regions, genders and generations, and gathered us all together, both good and bad, to celebrate a center rather than a circumference. It isn't a foregone conclusion that we are included. We don't deserve this wonderful family of faith. It is only by the unconditional acceptance and grace and good favor of God that we get to show up in this congregational life and be accorded a place of love and growth. The Holy Spirit comes to us while we are "yet at a distance" and invites us to join our lives together. We are all here because we accept God's gracious invitation to leave our autonomous individualism and join the community. And, we have to learn to live with each other and love each other. We come

as strangers to become brothers and sisters one to another. Family. A priesthood of believers who joyously submit to God and to each other.

Community is necessity. To be is to be with. You can't see a thing in that outer darkness and weeping sadness of your own isolated individualism. Come to the party. Come home.

Trust

Our job as preachers is the make the announcement of the essential equality and compelling community that we find in Jesus the Christ. That is the witness of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, then and now.

Karl Barth witnessed how complicit the German church had become with the corruption and oppression of the German government. The church of his day had lost its nerve. Barth concluded that the Christian churches had become so sophisticated and culturally accommodated that they no longer had the courage to speak truth to power. He sought throughout his entire life and ministry to correct this distortion by placing Jesus the Christ at the center, as *the* revelation of God.

Shortly before his death, a group of young ministers visited Basel where Barth taught. They were fortunate enough to get a visit with the great theologian. They asked him, "Professor, give us a bit of counsel as we begin our ministries. What would you encourage us to do?" As the story is told, the teacher puffed on his pipe a few seconds, disappeared like Moses behind a cloud of smoke, reappeared and said, "Pastors, step forward and announce that God has met all humanity in Jesus Christ, then step back, and see what the Holy Spirit can do with that."

There goes the future of the Church of Jesus Christ.

Preachers like us.

Let's see what the Holy Spirit can do with that.

Sermon: "Pentecost Power"

Deborah J. Chambers
Prince Frederick, Maryland

Most believers are familiar with and cherish the story of Pentecost. Every year, Pentecost is celebrated around the world as believers joyously revisit and reshare the story found in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. Whenever we hear the story, our hearts are stirred as we retell the moment the Holy Spirit, like a mighty rushing wind, rushed in to come alongside and help those who belong to God.

Pentecost marks the fulfillment of Jesus's promise, as found in the **Farewell Discourse** in the Gospel of John, chapters 14–16, when He tells the disciples that the Father would send another Comforter.

Following His crucifixion and resurrection, like a teacher who understands both the retention capacity of His students and the power of repetition, the Lord once again reminds the disciples in Luke 24:49, "Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high."

This conversation is expanded and continued in Acts 1:8 as Jesus says, "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

As He was speaking these final words, the Bible says He was taken away into the clouds. Generally speaking, the last words a person utters before death, before retiring from a position, or before making a significant departure are given extra weight and considered to be of special importance. Last words before a major departure are believed to offer a glimpse into a person's soul, highlight core beliefs, reinforce priorities, and secure the power of a legacy left behind.

Jesus's last words do that and so much more. They reveal the core, the focus, the legacy, and the priorities His disciples are expected to carry forward.

Jesus's final words outline a Holy Spirit-empowered collaboration that would mobilize the disciples to reach the world.

Churches, ministries, global workers, and others have used the directive of His final words, specifically Acts 1:8, to mobilize outreach and declare the gospel in strategic progression from the closest to the furthest. From Jerusalem (one's immediate family and city), to Judea (the broader regions of one's state and country), to Samaria (those who are culturally, socially, and relationally distant or difficult), and finally to the ends of the earth, representing global mission work.

We praise God for the Lord's final directive, for the empowering work of the Holy Spirit, and for the spread of the gospel to Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria.

From eleven handpicked disciples, to 120 gathered in the Upper Room, to 3,000 converts on the Day of Pentecost, the church experienced astounding and exponen-

tial growth. From its grassroots beginning as a small movement, it grew to millions of followers by AD 350. Today, roughly 31 percent of the world's 2.4 billion people identify as followers of Christ. While unreached people groups still remain, those committed to the spread of the gospel continue to labor tirelessly to reach them.

The message Christ communicated repeatedly to the disciples—that the Comforter would come, that they were to wait for Him, and that once He came they would be mobilized to reach Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts—is well underway. However, what if there is more? Not more for global missions teams, but more for us.

Jesus's last words emphasized two significant realities: mobilization and empowerment. While we have certainly mobilized, have we underestimated the purpose of empowerment? Not for those who do and dare great things for God, but for the rest of us.

Some time ago, a woman went viral repeating the phrase, "Holy Spirit activate." She appeared to be calling on the Holy Spirit to become active and show up in her situation, as if He were dormant or inactive and needed to be stirred in order to work. Does that sound like the same Holy Spirit the Father sent to help eleven disciples mobilize the world for God?

Perhaps the reason the phrase struck such a chord is because it reflects how many view the Holy Spirit. They fail to grasp the weight of Jesus's final words—that the Holy Spirit did not come only to mobilize, but to empower.

The power that enabled Christ's followers to witness across the world is the same power that enables us to be witnesses around the corner, in the store, on the job, within our families, and wherever we are.

If the final words of Christ were a command to wait for power, then the annual remembrance of Pentecost should remind us that the waiting period is over. Power has arrived. The Holy Spirit did not come merely as a one-day event or historical marker. He is a permanent presence, an active Helper, and the indwelling power of every believer.

Pentecost power was never meant to be reserved for pulpits, platforms, or passport holders. It was meant for ordinary believers living ordinary lives, called to bear extraordinary witness. We are mobilized in kitchens and classrooms, hospital rooms and boardrooms, sidewalks and break rooms.

The same Spirit who empowered Peter to preach boldly to thousands empowers us to speak and live as witnesses in our daily lives. The same Spirit who strengthened the early church to endure persecution empowers us to endure disappointment, hardship, and opposition without losing faith. The same Spirit who united people of different languages and cultures continues to reconcile, heal, and draw people together today.

Pentecost power is not about hype or emotional display. It is about transformation. It is the power to live differently, love deeply, forgive freely, and stand firmly. It

is the power to reflect Christ in both word and deed. It is the power to remain faithful when no one is watching and obedient even when it is uncomfortable.

The Holy Spirit does not need to be activated. He is already present, already working, already moving. What is often needed is not His arrival, but our awareness. Not His power increasing, but our surrender deepening.

When we yield to the Spirit, Pentecost moves from a moment we remember to a reality we live. The wind that filled the Upper Room still blows. The fire that rested on the disciples still refines. And the power that launched the church still equips believers today.

Pentecost power is not only for reaching the ends of the earth. It is for reaching the hearts right in front of us.

Instances of the Spirit in the Protestant Mainline

Matt Fitzgerald
Chicago, Illinois

"The outrageous is the reasonable, if introduced politely."

– Charles Fort

In 2014, I staffed a Bible study the night before my family's summer vacation began. Two people showed up. Louise and Paula. My mind kept wandering across the lake to Michigan. So, we were two or three, depending on the moment. I read a psalm. The deer's deep longing led us to lament a youthful enthusiasm for cocaine and to confess that wheelchairs breed idolatry.

"This chair controls my mood. It has too much power." The women were so hard on themselves. I interrupted. "What if you saw yourself through Jesus's eyes?" That turned our talk to heaven. Paula wondered where her dead husband was. Louise whacked the side of her wheelchair. "When I get there I don't know whether I'll become deer-like, leaping, free, or if I'll finally be at peace with this body. Either way, I'll be with Him."

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Vacation: swimming, badminton, cold gin. Time shifted. Or we slipped its hold. It was an hour earlier in Michigan, but we went the other way. The sun didn't set until 9:30. My children were in grade school. Our whole family was up past 1:00 a.m. for three straight weeks. We wrung the month of August dry. Then we began to resent its end. "Two days of vacation left." Time did its trick. We were back in the noose.

On our last day, neighbors we barely knew invited us for a boat ride. We conferred as a family, and agreed that we'd keep the boat ride to an hour. Our time was precious. The neighbors' family cottage hadn't changed in sixty years. The place glowed. Knotty pine walls and taxidermy lit by hand-painted deerskin lampshades. A Velveteen Rabbit home; kitsch loved so well it became real.

Our vacation neighbor is a dentist. He has a gentle, distracted demeanor, as if his mind is simultaneously pondering how not to hurt you and how quickly your insurance reimburses. He drove his Chris Craft like a madman. We ripped across the lake. Storm clouds gathered, but the dentist outgunned them, dodging squalls and rainfall gleefully. When he finally slowed down, our own wake rolled us. The moment the boat began to slow, his wife stood up, sure footed. Without saying anything, she reached under her seat and pulled out seven loaves of moldy sandwich bread. Then she moved to the stern, tore a piece of bread apart and began to toss it in the air. A seagull appeared. Then another. Soon there were about a dozen. Her husband increased the boat's speed carefully, moving just fast enough to keep the bread in the air and the birds ten feet behind us.

The dentist and his wife handed each member of my family a loaf of bread and an unspoken invitation. "Would you like to play our weird game?" Absolutely. We tore at our loaves and began throwing bread in the air. In ten minutes there were at least 200 gulls behind us. The clouds dispersed. I saw hundreds more on the blue horizon. It was disconcerting. Seagulls have a vulture aspect.

The dentist kept us safe. By the end, there were hundreds of seagulls riding the wind behind us, turning as we turned, the airborne train of a sky-sized wedding gown. We kept throwing bread, the gulls increased, billowed, became like doves.

When we reached the neighbor's dock, the birds turned away. Our hour had flown by. All five of us were lake-stunned and giddy, bonded to our neighbors, laughing with the dentist and his wife, hugging one another gently. Nobody tried to explain. When we got home, I glanced at the kitchen clock. We'd been on the lake for more than six hours. Time's noose slipped again.

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Back at work, I learned that both of the women from my Bible study were hospitalized after being diagnosed with fast-moving cancer. It must have been in them at the Bible study. Louise was a wreck, shifting in her bed, afraid she might lose her costly independence, enraged at the prospect of being the youngest resident of a nursing home. She had two friends with her. One looked like a nun and kept saying "trust the Lord." Louise twisted, grimaced. "That is not fucking helpful." Her other friend kept quiet and looked at Louise with pity in her eyes. I offered up a prayer asking God to intervene while thinking, once again, that providence is the least helpful Christian doctrine. We were Job's friends, pouring confusion into open wounds. Louise scowled. She resisted us. Her anger was the only truth in that room. It had the purity of fire. Everyone should witness such honesty.

Paula's husband Frank died of an aneurysm in 2000, still young enough to ride his Harley Davidson daily. Sitting up in her bed, tethered to three different machines, Paula was animated and joyful. She told me that Frank came to her just after she was diagnosed. He stood before her in their bedroom and spoke out loud. "You worry all the time. About the girls. About work. About the future. There is no worry here. Stop worrying. Don't wait to get here. Stop worrying right now. Start early." She beamed as she told me this. "Frank said, 'Start early. Life doesn't end. Or if it ends, it ends in a beginning.'" Unnerved, I hurried out of her room.

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The first chapter of Genesis is clear. God gives us time. We live within it. God made days to make a week, and then made us to live inside time's structure. We cannot escape the iron of time's logic. Six hours cannot become one. I know this. Just as I know a dead man cannot stand at the foot of his wife's bed to speak comfort in her ears.

In the early 1900s, Charles Fort spent years in the New York Public library, pouring over small town newspaper reports of things like a hailstone the size of an elephant, a cloud that rained stones, a cloud that rained nuts, or fish, or fish again. He found many fish storms. After collecting four books' worth of occurrences that science deemed impossible, Fort concluded, "Science is established preposterousness." Elsewhere he wrote, "I shut the front door upon Christ and Einstein, and at the back door hold out a welcoming hand to little frogs and periwinkles. I believe nothing of my own that I have ever written. I cannot accept that the products of minds are subject-matter for beliefs." His work aims to destabilize materialist rigidity. He takes the destabilization of Christianity for granted.

And yet, Fort's best work contains a Christian resonance. To believe in the Genesis account of creation is to confess that all phenomena is preposterous. Scientific dogma draws an arbitrary line between things that exist and then turns a blind eye to realities beyond the pale, deeming them impossible and unreal. I am not here to argue with science. I have no dog in that fight. But I wonder if the Christian dogma that defines my sense of *possible* (perhaps a better word is *permissable*) might cause me to suffer something like the scientific blindness Fort decries.

I believe that after death we wait for resurrection. In this, I am a Christian, and therefore at odds with the boundaries drawn by scientific materialism. The last time I preached on the general resurrection, a trustworthy church member told me the sermon was "intellectually insulting." Of course it was. Insofar as we let modern definitions of "possible" define reality, the resurrection of Jesus is impossible. We cover the ensuing dissonance with a brass quartet and flowers. The resurrection of *everyone* isn't so easily obscured. A marching band couldn't drown out how loudly the general resurrection shouts *impossible!* But, without the promise of its universal conclusion, Easter is reduced to a one-off miracle. If Easter's resurrection were *the* resurrection and took place for Jesus alone, it would be the only Jesus miracle rooted in his self interest. Indeed, one criterion used to establish whether a purported supernatural occurrence is a *Christian* miracle is whether or not it happens on behalf of another. The very notion of a self-directed miracle is anti-Christian, making an isolated Easter a nonsense holiday.

When we celebrate the resurrection, we are not celebrating the anniversary of Houdini's greatest escape. Instead, we are allowing ourselves to be shaped by a promise, a hint, a foretaste. We are tasting the first fruit, fed by it before the rest of the harvest comes in. Because of the resurrection we celebrate, we know how human existence ends. Resurrection has begun with the resurrection of Christ. It hasn't ended. We will die. And after dying, we will wait for Christ's return. We will keep on waiting until the promised end when heaven comes down to earth and brings the harvest in. On that day, the dead will be raised as Christ was raised, this ravaged earth will be made new, and we will finally be at home. For now, we wait. Even in death, we wait.

This is what the New Testament says when it speaks of resurrection. We wait until we rise. This is the line it draws. The Bible does not say, "You can go to heaven while your body rots or your ashes cool, and you may qualify for a day pass that lets you visit your cancer-stricken widow."

No. Scripture is clear. The soul and the body comprise the self. Without both, *you* are not going anywhere, because you are the sum of both. Without both soul and body, there is no you. This is why the incarnation took place. It is why human bodies should be revered, not violated. And it is why rational mainline preachers should aim to insult our church members by pressing past Jesus's resurrection into Paul's wildest claim. Do it the Sunday after Easter. Our people already know how to doubt. Let Thomas be. Lean into the general resurrection. It's safe. Nobody comes to church the week after Easter. You'll only insult your most faithful members.

And the ones who have held conversations with a dead spouse.

This is where my unhinged love for Christian dogma leads me. I assure you, such looniness will *preach*. But, its logic requires me to regard Paula's conversation with her husband as an impossibility or a heresy. At best a wishful lie. Materialist orthodoxy and Christian metaphysics have at least one thing in common. They both think Paula's wrong. Or crazy.

But she isn't. She's an accountant. She is a deeply moral, stable woman. And she wasn't the first congregant to tell me she had been visited by a dead loved one. The first one rattled me. I thought she was nuts or drunk, talking about her dear husband (who had finally succumbed to cirrhosis of the liver after three decades of daily, determined boozing that she was equally determined to ignore) showing up in the kitchen ten days after his funeral, espousing a kind of joyful regret and promising all would be well.

Then it happened again. A grieving father whose son died from suicide encountered his son while hiking in the White Mountains. "This wasn't a daydream. He was wearing hiking boots. We walked together for more than a mile. He told me he loved me, and that I must let myself be forgiven." Three such reports in twenty six years of ministry. This suggests three things:

1. I will hear at least one more of these stories before I retire.
2. Other church members have had similar encounters, and are either so cowed by science they disbelieve their eyes, or they don't trust me enough to share such tenderness. I hope it's this latter belief in total depravity that keeps them silent.
3. As a reader of this journal, it is likely that you are a preacher. Which suggests you will hear a version of Paula's story, if you haven't already.

All of which makes me love and fear the Holy Spirit. The first church felt God whirl inside its walls like a storm of joy. Turning over chairs God came on "like a wildfire" and left the church gasping in languages its gasping members could not speak. It wasn't just the furniture. Everything was upside down. A handful of rowdy

fishermen and unemployed tax collectors, a few shady young women and half a dozen widows are now the direct ancestors of the Sistine chapel and Dr King on the march in Birmingham. Obviously, this wasn't done on their own. All they did was call on God. And he showed up. Pulsing, surging, crackling.

The Spirit is not independent of the church in an absolute sense, but the two aren't reliably connected. The Spirit is the church's animating fuel, but it holds more in common with a burning river in Cleveland than the result of your thermostat. The Spirit is a corresponding wildness, not a partner. Right next to our long-running attempt to contain God's presence inside dogma, sermons, and stained glass, the Spirit of God is out of control and unwilling to stay in its lane. Which means it will come crashing through the walls we use to define propriety, permissibility, and possibility. Can you hear it? It sounds like wind, braying preposterousness to the tune of a hymn. Maybe. Perhaps that's just the sound of a storm. I am afraid to claim that my congregants' pious encounters with the uncanny are evidence of the Spirit. And I am afraid to say they aren't.

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Years ago I served a buttoned-down church that longed to be more diverse. We prayed and planned and remained the same. Then a man with a closed-head injury came to worship. He was wearing a helmet more than twenty years after his accident. Our practice was to pass a microphone for requests during the prayers of the people. Our guest took the mic and howled into it. "I want to have a child, but fifteen years ago my parents forced me to have a vasectomy! Lord forgive them!" At our next Worship Committee meeting, we decided to discontinue the open-mic policy. The Spirit will blow through the church. We can always close the windows.

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We can close the windows, but the Spirit will persist. Recently, a congregant who works in commercial real estate told me that her standard poodle spoke to her. It had good news. Her terminally ill husband had just qualified for a drug trial that could save his life. The dog shared this information five days before the man's neurologist received it. The dog didn't speak actual words. Canine physiology won't allow for it. Neither the dog nor the woman who told me this story are stupid. They know dogs can't vocalize in English. Rather than using his voice, the dog employed a sort of canine/human mind meld.

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The cliche, of course, is that the Protestant Mainline is unable to find or feel the Spirit. This is a self-loathing lie. Just last week, a struggling congregant explained why she was avoiding church. "It's the only place I cry. I can't cry at work. I don't cry at home, alone. But lately in worship, tears just overcome me. It is so embarrassing. I'm sorry."

I was quick to respond. "Don't apologize! People are always crying in church! You can't see them from where you sit, but I see people weeping every week!"

I was riled up. Three days earlier I broke down and wept while watching a rock and roll show. I went by myself to see the folk singer Joan Shelley and her husband, the guitarist Nathan Salsburg. The crowd had an NPR vibe. We sat in rows of folding chairs, as orderly as Presbyterians. But the whiskey and coke I ordered was surprisingly stiff and the music was wildly beautiful. The songs swooped and shuddered. They were pointed and grand.

Music comes to us as a signal from outside ourselves. Music forecasts heaven's dawn. In this regard, even the loudest song hits with the force of a hint, pointing toward our joyous end. Some day ... one day ... Music shows us where we're going. Music is so obviously tied to the Spirit. It comes to us from beyond us as a promise, a beckoning.

But Joan Shelley can *sing.* And singing isn't a visitation. It rises up from deep inside us. Not as a manifestation of human genius. More like a vestige of Eden still within us. An embodied ingot from a ruined empire, or the most important words of our great-grandparents' language, scraps of meaning in this new and broken land. Echoing Eden, it calls us back to what Eve and Adam lost, back to the paradise we were made for. Can anything evoke nostalgia like a song? Music is mysterious, but singing is our mother tongue.

None of this occurred to me in the moment. I was simply opened by the power of the songs and the lovely dynamic of this humble couple; two artists in love, transcending while pointing beyond themselves.

State precedes experience, of course. Meaning that when this music opened me, I felt the deep pain of my own life. Wondrous art onstage before me, failure and brokenness inside me. Of course I wept! I hope something similar spurs the tears I see on Sunday morning. I cannot let myself be so open during worship, but I know that others can. I mean to say, that while I cannot break down and sob in the pulpit, I must be in touch with the feeling. The theater director Henry Godinez recently told me, "A good actor brings an audience to tears. A bad actor cries on stage. You don't want an audience to take care of you, or to feel your feelings. You want to bring them into their own emotions. To do that, you have to know the source of your own tears quite well." Preaching isn't acting. Most good preachers have felt the difference after failing to honor the distinction. Beyond the performative, if I were to weep in the pulpit, I would violate the same professionalism that prevents me from bringing a toothache to the dentists in my congregation. You don't want your congregation to take care of you. And I don't want them feeling my feelings.

Which isn't to say I don't feel theirs. I lied to my tearful congregant. I don't see tears every week. In the churches I serve, few people are torn enough to collapse in public. Or spirited enough to disarm themselves. At least at any one time. But when I recall the dozens of people I see weep each year, and then begin to recall the hundreds I have seen in prior years, people weeping on Easter, weeping

at weddings, crying fat tears on a dull Sunday in February, I see hundreds and hundreds of faces shining with holy tears. The pews of the Protestant mainline are flowing with charisma.

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On August 31, 2022, the governor of Texas began bussing Venezuelan migrants to Chicago. By late 2023, more than 30,000 people had been relocated. When human beings are used as political props, the church is given an opportunity to be the church. Chicago's shelters were overwhelmed. The city began housing Venezuelan families in police stations. There were infants sleeping in the foyer of the 18th District station, a few blocks from the church I serve. We had space and began housing migrant families. At one point, more than thirty people were living in our building. I got to know these families, but communication was a challenge. We did not speak the same language. Each weekday on my way into work I exchanged an awkward sidewalk "hola" with two teenage siblings making their way from the church to our local high school. Despite the language barrier, many of our migrant guests joined our church. I baptized the teenagers' baby brother. Eventually, we found apartments for our guests. The teenagers, their little brother, and their parents moved across the city. But, they remained enrolled at the same high school.

Last October, ICE began abducting people in our neighborhood. On the day they arrived, I could hear helicopters above my office and some shouting from the street. As I began to realize what was happening, I received a text message. Google translate revealed, "Pastor, ICE is outside our school. My sister and I need to get home. The train isn't safe today." I wrote him back, called the school, and reached out to neighbors in the congregation. We joined several dozen other drivers in the high school cafeteria as a kind of makeshift school bus. I drove my two teenage congregants home. I hadn't tried to talk with them since they moved out of the building. My Spanish had not improved, But after a few months of language acquisition classes and a summer intensive, they suddenly spoke English well. It felt miraculous, diving into conversation with kids I knew, but hadn't ever understood. They were afraid, of course. But, they had the buoyancy and forward thrust of adolescence. It took more than an hour to reach their home. In that time, our conversation moved easily from ICE to rap music to college dreams and laughter about their teachers. By the time we got to their new neighborhood, what had begun as an emergency felt like a normal pastoral errand.

We parked a block away from their apartment. It was a bright day. The street was lined with trees. The sun hit the street through orange and red leaves. The sidewalk held an amber glow. I saw their little brother in this gorgeous light. He began to race toward us, moving with a toddler's thumping diaper-stride. He was gleeful. I laughed out loud. And then, behind him, I saw his parents the moment they saw their endangered older children. I'd seen them a few days before in worship. They appeared to have aged ten years in the interval. They looked terrified, careworn, horrified by the prospect of their children, abducted. They embraced their teenagers with such force.

I caught their eyes as a momentary respite washed over them. Their eyes spoke deep relief, but not a word of hope. They said thank you and pray for us and thank God this day is over but tomorrow will bring more fear and we will keep on living. I told them I understood, or was learning to at least. This was all crystal clear. We understood each other. We did not speak a word. We don't speak the same language.

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> "to retrieve the bright unbearable reality as you might lift the roof off a church in order to remember what you're worshiping."
>
> - Alice Oswald

Obviously, the spirit can work in safe sermon illustrations like the story I shared above. But it can't be confined to them. The moment we think so is the moment we confuse the church with what Alice Oswald calls God's "bright, unbearable reality." I wonder if the Spirit wants to tear the roof off the church to remind his people of who we're really worshiping. Which is to say, in its most vivid appearances, the Spirit does not preach.

I spent my first seven years of ministry in an urban church that housed a food pantry. I grew familiar with vaguely threatening appeals for cash. "I'm on the run from the Colombian mob. I just ditched a car full of cocaine on the side of Addison Street and I need $200 to get a bus ticket out of town. Otherwise they'll come after my family. They could be on their way *here* right now." Or the old standby, "I found a job as a line cook, but I can't begin until I've got a pair of rubber-soled shoes, and they cost $60." Or the quick and dirty version: "I'm down to my last colostomy bag!"

I heard a lot of wild stories, but I didn't fear for my life in a church office until I began serving in a wealthy suburb. To get into my office, the man who threatened to kill me had to overcome significant barriers. A train or a bus, a locked church door, two secretaries, a long hallway, and then my closed door. I have no memory of his arrival. It was as if the wind blew him in. He wore a dirty windbreaker, dirty jeans, and a blown out pair of old Brooks running shoes. He smelled like fish and cigarettes. I remember that he was very short and had a beard that covered his entire face, stopping just beneath his eyes. He told me that he had been working on a fishing boat in Alaska and had once witnessed an eagle swoop out of the sky to snatch an infant from its mother's arms. I told him I thought this was unlikely, and he grew offended, began to curse.

Then he asked me for $100. He needed it to catch a bus to New Hampshire to visit his sick mother. I declined and he persisted and I felt a familiar sadness, that old void between a desperate person bending the truth for cash and a church that sits on money. We are all lying when this happens.

He continued, cursing louder now. I told him to leave. He leapt out of his chair and stepped toward me. He had me cornered, pinned to a comfortable office chair, alone. Anger rolled off him. He said he was going to kill me, and reached into his jacket for a weapon.

The strangest resignation came over me. I remember thinking, "So, this is how I die. Stabbed to death by a tiny deranged sailor while sitting in a wingback chair in a church office in a tony suburb that does not feel like home." I accepted death. I exhaled. He pulled his hand out of his jacket, brandishing … a filthy rain damaged Mario Puzo paperback. I don't remember the title, but I do remember it wasn't *The Godfather*. He wanted to kill me with some lesser work.

The moment I realized he wasn't going to stab me, peace rushed out of my body as quickly as it had arrived. I became enraged. I leapt up, shouting, spitting foul insults and thinking of my children. I roared threats and violence at the man, raised my hands, stepped toward him. Both secretaries and the church custodian burst into my office. I caught my breath and apologized. "It's okay, I'm okay, I'm safe." The custodian looked at me, "I wasn't worried about you. It sounded like you were about to kill someone." I looked around the room for the little man. He was gone. As if the same wind that blew him in, had carried him away. The Spirit, saving him from my violence? Saving me from the same? Or, perhaps, the Spirit, blowing a strange reminder on its insistent wind. *You want to be alive*.

Pentecost Preaching: What If Jesus Meant All This Stuff?

Mark Ramsey
Charlottesville, Virginia

There is a story that has populated sermons in some traditions for decades. A lifesaving station began as a ramshackle hut with devoted volunteers who braved storms to rescue shipwreck victims. Many lives were saved and soon the station became famous. As their fame grew, so did the desire of others to be associated with their work. Money was raised for new boats, more training, more crews. The hut, too, was replaced by a comfortable building that could handle the needs of those who had been saved from the sea. Since shipwrecks don't happen every day, it also became a sort of social club. As time passed, those who gathered became so engaged in being together that they lost interest in lifesaving. When people were actually rescued, it was kind of a nuisance because those rescued were dirty and sick and soiled the carpeting. Soon, the social activities of the club became so numerous, and the lifesaving activities so few, that there was a showdown at a club meeting, with some insisting the club return to its original purpose. A vote was taken. Those wanting to return to the original purpose were a tiny minority; they were invited to leave and start another club on their own terms. Which is what they did, just a little down the coast. They did so with selflessness and daring in saving lives. And after a while, their heroism made them famous. Whereupon their membership was enlarged, their hut reconstructed … and you can guess how it went from there. If you happen to visit that area today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs dotting the shoreline. Shipwrecks still occur in those parts, but nobody seems to notice much.

Were it not for Pentecost, this could have happened to the fragile community formed by the first followers of Jesus Christ after his death and resurrection.

Do you remember where you were or what you were doing on Monday, April 6?

April 6 was the day after Easter Day. Had anything changed? We'd delivered our Easter sermons with extra preparation and focus. The sanctuary was fuller than usual, the lilies were fragrant, the alleluias rang out. And then ... Monday arrived. The normal rhythm resumed. The routine reasserted itself. What changed? In the gospel accounts, even though we have these post-Easter appearances of Jesus, his followers don't really stop long enough to enter a whole new life. A slightly remodeled life, perhaps, but like all of us, it appears they didn't like their routine overly disrupted. There is always the temptation to live most of life on automatic pilot.

The National Transportation Safety Board has warned that "humans are not good monitors of highly automated systems for extended periods of time."[1] As one veteran pilot noted, "No light comes on to tell you that you're being complacent."[2] Pentecost moves Easter out into the world—and deep into our lives—where "automatic pilot"

is just no way to live.

Nevertheless, Easter's promise and urgency get co-opted all the time. Our culture tends to turn Jesus into whatever people seem to need Jesus to be, no matter how far away it is from the life of grace and hope that Jesus lived for and died for. One follower of the Easter Jesus recently put it this way:

> The other night I headed downtown for a stroll with some friends from out of town. We walked along the river, where there are street performers, artists, musicians. We passed a great magician who did some pretty sweet tricks like pour change out of his iPhone, and then there was a preacher. He wasn't quite as captivating as the magician. He stood on a box, yelling into a microphone, and beside him was a coffin with a fake dead body inside. He talked about how we are all going to die and go to hell if we don't know Jesus. Some folks snickered. Some told him to shut the hell up. A couple of teenagers tried to steal the dead body in the coffin. All I could do was think to myself, I want to jump up on a box beside him and yell at the top of my lungs, "God is not a monster."
>
> Maybe next time I will.

Shane Claiborne, the one recounting all this, reflected on the experience: "The more I have read the Bible and studied the life of Jesus, the more I have become convinced that Christianity spreads best not through force but through fascination. But over the past few decades our Christianity, at least here in the United States, has become decreasingly fascinating. We have given the atheists less to disbelieve. And the sort of Christianity many of us have seen on TV and heard on the radio looks less and less like Jesus."[3]

Thomas Merton identified this hazard in *New Seeds of Contemplation*: "There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence ... activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects ... is to succumb to violence ... It destroys the fruitfulness of [one's] own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful."[4]

Pentecost is the gift of fascination. Renewing. Enlivening. Delighting. Full of mystery and hope as it stops cold all attempts by those who want to turn God into a monster. Jesus really did mean that the way of love is the way of life. Jesus really did intend for peace to rule and justice to prevail. The triumph over the cross was a triumph over everything ugly we do to ourselves and to others. It is the final promise that love prevails. Against all odds, love overcomes. Pentecost is the promise that the Spirit of the Risen Christ shows up every time Easter is about to be co-opted or manipulated or corrupted. It is the voice of Pentecost that says: "Not that way … *this* way. Not for your own aims … but for God's sake!" Jesus really meant all he lived for and all he died for.

Eugene Peterson addressed this in his work, arguing that pastors face constant

temptation to become "shopkeepers" rather than spiritual guides—managing religious goods and services rather than attending to prayer, scripture, and spiritual direction. When preaching becomes primarily about effectiveness—measured by attendance, positive feedback, or ministerial reputation—we've shifted into shopkeeper mode. In this light, Pentecost becomes a product to be marketed rather than a prophetic word to be received and delivered.[5]

Simone Weil understood attention as a fundamentally spiritual practice. In *Waiting for God*, she wrote: "Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity." She wasn't speaking of mere concentration, but of a quality of presence that empties itself of preoccupation to genuinely receive reality: "Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object."[6] In this case, Pentecost is both the object of our attention and our shepherd into a world of engagement, for God's sake.

In a sermon on this text, William Willimon, a generous contributor to *JP*, said:

> I saw the expansive Acts 2 reach of God in the great mosaic at the church in Monreale, Sicily. It is a wonder of the medieval world. There, presiding over a dazzling array of jewel-like depictions of the story of our salvation, is Christ Creator of all. Having seen photographs of that mosaic, I expected to be bedazzled by the Byzantine otherness of Christ, Christ the Judge of humanity. And yet the Christ I saw was Christ of the wide embrace, hands outstretched, reaching out from his majesty as if to encircle the whole church, the whole creation in his reach.
>
> All the stories of scripture—told with such wondrous vitality in the mosaics of Monreale—are vignettes of this grand vision of a God who is stubbornly determined to embrace all of humanity. Leaving the church at Monreale, a street vendor held up a trinket with Christ's picture stamped upon it. "Don't you want to take a little Jesus with you, mister?" he asked. But no, I realized, we don't take Christ with us—Christ always takes us places.[7]

This reversal matters profoundly for preaching. Spirit-empowered proclamation doesn't offer a portable, controllable Jesus who endorses our preferences. Instead, it surrenders to a Christ who propels us toward uncomfortable truths and demanding ministries. The preacher becomes less a dispenser of religious goods and more a witness to where the Spirit is already moving.

The Spirit of the Risen Christ given to us on Pentecost is the Spirit that reinforces the truth that Jesus really did mean everything he lived for and everything he died for. And that life, that death, that resurrection, this Spirit propels us into the world. This Holy Spirit of propulsion may drive you into the streets to set things right, it may cause you to leave the comforts of home for the next challenge, or it may drive you to return to the home where those who have known you longest and know you best offer their embrace. You may be propelled to Washington DC, or to your State

Capitol or to City Hall. Then again, you may find yourself discovering yourself holding the hand of one at a bedside, or folding your hands in prayer, or accompanying a friend to an AA meeting. The Spirit of Pentecost can propel you to raise your voice, or to learn to listen more carefully than you've ever done before. Wherever the Spirit moves you—make no mistake—God is speaking, and God is telling us that Jesus really meant all the things he lived for and died for.

In *The Spiritual Life Of Children*, Robert Coles writes about Ginny, a young girl from a poor family who is bright, articulate, imaginative, and has a keenly developed spirituality. Ginny recounts, for example, that her uncle, who was wounded in Vietnam, is still nervous and upset, still prone to frequent crying. Ginny wonders how God must have felt during the violence of the war. "If my uncle cries now," she reflects, "God must have cried, too.

"God must have wept, don't you think?" One day, Ginny was walking home and, along the way, encountered an elderly woman who seemed lost and confused. Ginny asked the woman if she needed help, and the woman, in relief, responded: "If you could, that would be wonderful." Ginny discovered that the woman had been walking to visit her daughter but had gotten disoriented. Although Ginny was late for her home chores, she sensed that getting this troubled stranger safely to her destination was the chore she most needed to be doing. So she traveled with her, talked gently to her, listened to her as the woman spoke of the pain of her life, and guided her to her daughter's house. When they arrived and Ginny started to leave, the woman grasped her arm and announced that God had sent Ginny to her, and that later she would pray a prayer of thanks to God for having Ginny there. On the way home, Ginny wondered what it would be like to be old, wondered if she were old and in need, if God would send some kid like her to help. "Maybe God puts you here," Ginny thought, "and ... gives you these hints of what's ahead, and you should pay attention to them, because that's God speaking to you."[8] Pentecost is the remarkable gift of being spiritually alert and being open to holy interruptions, all at once. That balance—that art—requires the Spirit's transformative presence.

Jesus really did mean all that he lived for and all that he died for. And just to make sure we understand that, at Pentecost we are given the Spirit to propel us into those places we may not go on our own. Pentecost is Easter extended. Pentecost texts seek to sing Easter's song in all times and in all places.

In 1972, two years before Duke Ellington died, Yale University held a gathering of leading black jazz musicians to raise money for a department of African American music.

Aside from Ellington, the musicians who came for three days of concerts, jam sessions, and workshops included Eubie Blake, Noble Sissle, Dizzy Gillespie, Charles Mingus, Max Roach, Mary Lou Williams, and Willie (the Lion) Smith. During a performance by a Gillespie-led sextet, someone, evidently unhappy with his presence on campus, called in a bomb threat. The police attempted to clear

the building, but Mingus refused to leave, urging the officers to get all the others out but adamantly remaining onstage with his bass. "Racism planted that bomb, but racism ain't strong enough to kill this music," he was heard telling the police captain. "If I'm going to die, I'm ready. But I'm going out playing *Sophisticated Lady."* Once outside, Gillespie and his group set up again. But coming from inside was the sound of Mingus intently playing Ellington's dreamy thirties hit, which, that day, became a protest song, as the performance kept going on and on and getting hotter. In the street, Ellington stood in the waiting crowd just beyond the theatre's open doors, smiling. [9]

This way forward requires shifts in how we understand our calling:

First, we must abandon the illusion of control. Spirit-empowered preaching means yielding our carefully crafted messages to the possibility of divine interruption. Like Mingus refusing to stop playing despite the bomb threat, we continue proclaiming Easter's reality even when it feels dangerous or foolish.

Second, we must recover fascination over force. As Claiborne observed, Christianity spreads through fascination, not coercion. Our preaching should emanate wonder at God's persistent love rather than desperation to scare people into belief. The Spirit makes the gospel compelling; we simply bear witness.

Third we must trust that Jesus meant everything he lived for and died for. In a time when our culture is seeking to water down and obscure truth, righteousness, insight, and wisdom, Pentecost insists that there can be no hedging, no qualifying, no softening the radical demands of grace. The Spirit reinforces this truth, preventing us from domesticating Jesus into manageable proportions.

Fourth, we must recognize that we don't take Christ with us—Christ takes us places. Our sermons should prepare congregations not to possess Jesus but to be possessed by him, not to control the Spirit but to be caught up in the Spirit's movement. And, in the same spirit, our sermons cannot be just our own best take on "where things stand" or "what I think we need to do" but rather the utter obedience and freedom to allow Jesus Christ to take us along for his journey and for his purposes.

Finally, we must cultivate the spiritual practices that train attention and resist autopilot. This requires intentional discipline: stepping away from the algorithms that profit from your anxiety, sitting in silence before you preach, finding people who'll check in on how you're actually doing, and taking real breaks so your mind can stop spinning. But ultimately, it requires dependence on the Spirit—the very power that won't let Easter remain a comfortable tradition, that insists resurrection changes everything, that propels us beyond our careful planning into genuine encounter with the living God.

Pentecost keeps playing the song of Easter and plays it with such passion, such fascination, such protest, such joy … that it just keeps going on and on, getting hotter and hotter.

It catches you up in its wake and moves you into what Jesus cared about most:

a day shaped by attention, purpose, and propulsion. A life filled with hope and love, occupied in bringing peace to the world, engaged in opening the spigots of justice so it can roar down like an ever-flowing stream.

Jesus really did care about all the things he lived for and all the things he died for. At Pentecost, the Spirit of the Risen Christ has shown up, and Easter's power just keeps going on and on and on. And we get to pay attention. We are caught up in God's purposes. And we are propelled—as Christ's beloved community—into God's world of hope and possibility.

Notes

1. National Transportation Safety Board. *Collision Between Vehicle Controlled by Developmental Automated Driving System and Pedestrian, Tempe, Arizona*, March 18, 2018. NTSB/HAR-19/03, 19 Nov. 2019. Concurring Statement. "Human attention span is limited, and we are notoriously poor monitors."

2. "As Attention Wanders, Rethinking Autopilot" by Chrstine Negroni, *The New York Times*, May 18. 2020

3. Shane Claiborn, *Esquire*, October 2019

4. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*. New Directions, 1961, pp 15-16

5. Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

6. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*. Translated by Emma Craufurd, Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009, p. 105.

7. William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Logos Productions, May 2010

8. Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children*, HarperOne, 1991

9. "Black, Brown, and Beige: Duke Ellington's music and race in America" by Claudia Roth Pierpont, *The New Yorker*, May 17, 2010

Sermon: "Are You Afraid of the Dark?"

Samantha Gonzalez-Block
Potomac, Maryland

This sermon was delivered by Reverend Gonzalez-Block on June 6, 2025, at the Montreat Youth Conference

In a way, I've been in your shoes … in your pews. I never came to Montreat as a conferee, but I did come for the first time as a back-home leader exactly ten years ago. This was about seven seconds after taking my first call (my first job) here in Asheville, as the Associate Pastor at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church—a role I was blessed to be in for six years. When I arrived, I was immediately sent here to Montreat, with nine youth and one other back-home leader.

I didn't know what to expect. Like many of you for whom this is your first time here, you might be wondering: "What is going on? Where am I—*really*?" What is all this energizer enthusiasm and how is it possible my body is moving like this? Rest assured you are in good hands … and in a day or two you will likely be the most enthusiastic participant—perfecting beloved energizer moves like "the Bernie" and "Beyonce," and singing "Revolution" at the top of your lungs in the shower. It's OK … this is a safe space.

Looking back at my summer here ten years ago, I can remember that first night very vividly. I went to the adult chaperone meeting, like many of you did last night. And at the end, as they were getting ready to send us off, they casually announced: "Get some rest. We are so glad you're here. Be mindful of the bears. Have a great night. See you tomorrow."

"Excuse me … " I said. "Can we backtrack to the part about the bears. What bears? *Bears*?!?"

Now, I had just moved from New York City to Asheville. So, I had already worked through my fear of roaches and subway mice, but big black bears that roam the streets freely was new to me. And if you are still processing that there are bears here. Don't worry, have a great night and see you tomorrow! No, I'm just kidding, let me tell you a bit more of what happened.

As we left that adult meeting, I remember thinking there is no way I am walking out here alone. I clung to the other adults. "Hello! Let's walk together!" I said enthusiastically to the other leaders.

"OK," they said. They thought I was there to make a friend—I was there *to live*. I turned my phone flashlight on and walked with my new best buds, arm in arm. But as we continued on, everyone started to break away—and head into the safety of their homes. Finally, it was just me, and my phone flashlight, and my fears. I could hear my breath—shallow—as I walked uphill into the deep dark night.

And just when I thought it couldn't get worse, I noticed my phone flashlight had 1% battery left—surely not enough to get me to my destination. I now had a choice:

Do I use that last bit of battery for as long as it will light my way *(because seriously it was like the furthest house on the mountain*) or do I sacrifice every bit of my cool-new-pastor-vibe by using that 1% to call the house and ask someone to come down and find me and walk me up the hill—admitting to everyone that I was afraid.

~

What are you afraid of? What keeps you up at night? What keeps you silent in class or at Youth Group or small group? What keeps you from expressing how you really feel? What keeps you from asking for help?

God knows, for as long as we have breath—we have fears. It's normal. It's human.

Fear of getting lost. Fear of monsters under the bed. Fear of getting in trouble. Fear of being too smart, too clumsy, too serious, too funny, too quiet, too loud, too faithful, too doubtful … the list goes on and on.

How many of us here have been afraid we would not make the team—varsity or junior varsity or a club team? How about auditioning for the school play? Or running for school government?

We have spent the day exploring some of these fears together. This morning, your keynote speakers, Brad and Julianne Clayton, asked you to share some of your "What ifs," and here were some of your heartfelt responses:

What if I disappoint my parents, myself—even God? What if I don't get into my dream school? What if I never find a partner or friends who appreciate me for all that I am? What if the cancer returns? What if we go to war? What if I relapse? What if the grief never goes away? What if our planet can't recover? What if I can't hear God's voice or trust where God is leading? What if I fail? What if I never forgive myself? What if I am not enough?

Now, don't get me wrong: fear is not all bad. It can help keep us safe. Keep us from doing something too crazy, too out of the box, or something way out of our comfort zone.

Like we have been talking about today, fear can also hold us back from opportunities or from one another. It can keep us from taking grand leaps of faith, vital steps forward, it can prevent us from following God when God is calling out to us.

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I remember when I graduated from seminary in New York City and was looking for my first call as a pastor, I thought I knew exactly where I was headed. And, it wasn't to Asheville. In fact, I approached my pastor, Greg Horn, for some advice on next steps. I announced to him: "I don't want to look at any churches outside of the New York area!" It made sense. I was comfortable where I was living: my family was close by. I had great friends and a community already established. I had my favorite bagel place, my favorite pizzeria, my routine. Why would I venture away from all that? *Makes sense, right?*

Well, my pastor looked me in the eyes and with a gentle smile asked. "Why are you trying to limit God's Spirit?"

"Why are you trying to limit God's Spirit?" Suddenly, all that clarity I had went dark. What he was really asking me was: "What are you so afraid of?"

The truth is: I had lost sight of the One who I said I was following. Jesus wasn't ordering my steps, fear was. In fact, I was trying to pull Jesus off course, down the path I wanted to go, instead of grasping Christ's hand and saying, "Lord, you lead the way."

Can anyone here relate? I imagine so. These pushes and pulls. These big decisions and small. From college and high school choices, to the countless needs of our wider world that we have to navigate.

We know that in this time in which we are living, the road can feel jam packed with signs that say: "be afraid" "be silent" "be territorial" "be closeted" "be hopeless" "be competitive" "be alone."

Fear seeps into every headline and press conference and social media post—maybe it found its way into the hallways of your school, or your living room, maybe even into the conversations at youth group or here at Montreat. There is war and violence and oppression and prejudice of all varieties all around us. There is finger-pointing and bullying, affecting our mental health and sense of stability.

We may be feeling like we have to build up walls to divide ourselves from one another, to believe there is a hierarchy of God's love and affection, to see the rich diversity amongst us (or within ourselves) as something to squash, or silence, or be ashamed of, instead of to celebrate and lift high.

Worse still, we may be feeling pushed to see each other as "other." To separate or rank ourselves based on the color of our skin, based on our nationality, based on who we love, or how we identify, or the clothes we wear, or the thickness of our accents, or where we go to school, or our politics, or our age, or our different abilities, or gender identity, our religion. *Should I keep going?*

And we travel in fear of each other—instead of recognizing each other for who we really are—instead of seeing one another as Christ sees us: as precious, known, and loved children of God.

Each of us here—each of you—is a precious child of God. That isn't something you earn—it is something you are. In fact if you get only one thing out of this week: get this: "I am a precious child of God." *Can you say that with me?* I am a precious child of God.

So, precious children of God, how do we face our fears? How do we look our worries head on and say I am not following you? How do we stand in the pitch darkness (with 1% battery left) and refuse to be frozen and afraid?

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
She makes me lie down in green pastures.
God leads me beside the still waters.
She restores my soul.

Psalm 23 is like a flashlight that we can carry with us throughout our lives. Some of us may have learned this psalm at an early age. Some of us learned it today. Some of you, or your parents or grandparents have it memorized. It is often said to little

ones before bed, or on Sunday mornings, or at funerals, or in about a dozen horror and action films in moments of distress.

Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;

Psalm 23 begins as a song *about* God's presence on the path—always and all the time. And quickly shift to a song *to and for* God declaring I know *you* are with me every step of the way … in the fear, in the joy, in the light, in the dark, when I am starting my path, when I am at a crossroads, when I am at a rest stop, when I have finished my journey, you are with me—my shepherd, my restoration, my guide—so, what am I so afraid of?

Do you know how many times in our Bible we hear those words "do not be afraid" or "fear not"? *Over 300 times!* Over 300 times our biblical ancestors are re-assured that God is with them, as God is with us.

When Mary and Joseph are freaking out when they learn they are going to be parents to Jesus, the angels reply, "Do not be afraid." When the Hebrew people are preparing to flee from slavery in Egypt, Moses assures them that God has their back, by saying: "Do not be afraid." When the women see Jesus risen from the dead and are startled and amazed, Jesus says: "Do not be afraid." Again and again and again, we are reminded that God is here—as God has always been and will be. He's got your number, he knows your name, you are not alone—and you need not fear.

So why stay silent then when the world needs tending? Why stay stuck when the path goes dim? Why limit God's Spirit when we know we have the tools to follow?

Friends, you will no doubt find yourselves walking these roads at night this week. And when you do I want you to remember something. So often we associate light with God's presence and darkness with God's absence. But we have to be mindful about this kind of thinking. It can unknowingly heighten our fear of the dark, and prevent us experiencing all the wonders it can bring. Even worse, it can unknowingly seep into racist ideologies or vicious dichotomies like good and bad—right and wrong—us and them—lightness and darkness—you and me.

But the truth is, God is at home in the dark. In fact there has never been a time when the darkness has not known God's presence. It's how the world began. And as the scripture tells us light did not come to replace that darkness. Light came to be a *companion* to it. God says the light will shine in the day and the darkness at night. They are companions for the journey.—working together to care for the world.

Can you do me a favor? Can you close your eyes for a minute? What do you see?

Even when we close our eyes, we still see glimmers of light. Darkness and light—divine and sacred—working hand in hand to guide us on our way..

So friends, when we are standing in the middle of the field outside in the heat of the day—Your shepherd, God is there. And when we are standing in the pitch black of night, in the darkest valley or hill—Your shepherd, God is there. Calling us in, calling us out and calling us toward one another.

~

Let me take you back to my first night here at Montreat ten years ago. Remember, I was by myself—with a decision to make. Do I keep it cool, and use that last bit of battery to find my own way home alone? Or do I throw that out and call for someone in my group to come get me? Show of hands, what do you think I did? Went it alone? Or called for help?

So, I decided who needs to be cool?!? I picked up the phone and called the house.

"Hey … what's up?" I said, clearing my throat. "Can someone please come walk with me? I'm down the road?"

And then my phone died. And I stood in the darkness. And I swear I found myself saying, *"The Lord is shepherd; I shall not want. She makes me lie down in green pastures. God leads me beside still waters, She restores my soul … "*

And a few minutes later (it felt like more), I heard something approaching quickly. Oh gosh … .a bear? But, you know what? It wasn't a bear. And it wasn't an adult. It was one of our youth, Colleen, whom I had only just met earlier that day. She was literally skipping through the darkness towards me.

"Hey Sam," she said with a bright voice. I couldn't see her face clearly in the dark, but I sensed her warmth—and her no judgement. "I've come to get you!"

"Don't you want to turn your flashlight on?" I asked. "I didn't bring one," she said. "It's OK. I know the way." And she linked her arm in mine, and she guided me up the hill to our house, where all the rest of the youth were waiting.

I was humbled that night. Because I had come to Montreat to shepherd her—and there she was—shepherding me.

Just as God promises to accompany us in the darkness, we too are called to be God's feet and God's arms accompanying one another—especially in those moments of vulnerability, suffering, and yes, fear.

This week, I wonder how you can put your fears aside and open yourselves to the possibilities to let God's Spirit lead the way. What new connections will you make in small groups, at recreation, with those sitting next to you? Whose week will you change for the better? What will happen if you come on this stage and serve as a leader, singer, or in the Variety Show? What's possible if you let yourself be vulnerable and share a bit about who you are with others? Or if you let go of your phone, and just be fully here?

How will we experience God for the first time or anew?
How will we be transformed in the process?

Siblings in Christ, God is at home in the darkness, and God is here to shepherd us along the way. Don't worry about the bears. You're going to be OK. "Do not fear," God says over and over again. So, let's open our eyes, link our arms, and skip joyfully into the night. We've got lots to do—and no time to be afraid.

Sermon: "Pentecostal Power"

Andrew Connors
Baltimore, Maryland

"When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Fellow Jews[a] and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

'In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit,
and they shall prophesy.
And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,

before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.
Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'"

- Acts 2:1-21

The winds howl; the tongues of fire descend—I can feel those Marvel-esque superpowers about to descend on those disciples so they can change the world! Send us that Spirit that can shake the rafters, blow through the streets, upend systemic oppression, clean house and our hearts. *Come on* Holy Spirit! We need that Pentecost superspreader event more than ever. But what does God give first to the church? Not superpowers. The disciples can't even change water to wine. The first gift of the Holy Spirit is the ability to hear and be heard. What a freaking disappointment! I mean, no offense to the counselors among us—I love therapy and all. I guess I just expected God to give us a little more than active listening skills.

I mean, Jesus, we've got big problems here. We've got ICE police, armed like military soldiers deployed in our streets separating families from each other and killing civilians with no accountability. We need help here, Jesus, to sort out this mess. We've got people so politically divided that they have a hard time even sharing a meal together, much less agreeing to solve problems with words instead of weapons. We need help here, Jesus, to sort out this mess. Our neighborhoods are still struggling to emerge from the legacies of redlining and unemployment, and the city government can't even keep up with cutting the grass or picking up the trash. We need help here, Jesus, to sort out this mess.

And God decides to give the church the gift of listening! How weak is that? The arrival of God in the world sometimes feels like the biggest disappointment, at least according to the Christian story. I know we're not supposed to acknowledge this since our job as so-called believers is to try to convince other people that the Christian story is the greatest story ever told and one that *everyone* should be a part of, but allow yourself the freedom not to drink the Kool-Aid for just a moment, and you might see what I'm talking about. The earth longs for a savior and God arrives on the scene as a baby. A baby can't do anything about the world's problems! A baby born to an unwed teenage mother. We all know the statistics stacked against a child in that situation. Our first prophet isn't some truth-to-power speaker inside the halls of Jerusalem but a camel-haired, cicada-eating weirdo who preaches from the equivalent of, like, New Jersey or something—no offense to New Jersey, but who's going to leave the center of culture to go there? Jesus's best friends are maligned women, tax collectors, and sinners. His disciples don't have ivy league degrees. They fish for a living. We're promised a Savior who will change the world, and he ends up tortured on a cross, killed with common criminals. We're promised a church who will receive a Spirit to enable us to be transformed and to transform the world, and God gives us active listening skills?!

Don't strike me down for saying this, but it's almost like Jesus lied to the disciples right before he left. "You will receive *power* when the Holy Spirit has come upon you." That's what I'm waiting for from the Spirit—*power to change*. Power to change the death spiral of our shrinking city. Power to change the planet-killing practices of our economies. Power to change the centuries-old fights among human beings fought out on the battlefields of our religions, or our economic oppression, or our ideological wars, whether hot or cold. I'm waiting for that power to descend out of the heavens and onto the right crowd of people who can take their good and correct politics and replace all the terrible stuff that we've lived through, or need to clean up from—years and years of unjust human arrangements birthed to give so much to the few while so many suffer, divided by race and clan and religion and gender and disability.

When it comes to the church, I often think that we need *less listening* and *more action*. Something bad happens in the world—a mass shooting, a racist policy deepening inequality, another war ignited by divisions we fail to address—and the church offers "thoughts and prayers" when we should be taking to the streets. That's the criticism and it often fits. But there's another critique that fits the church and anybody who wants to make change, just as well. That is that we act before we ever listen to people whose lives we've already judged as to what they need. The church based a global mission strategy almost entirely on that stance for a time. "We know what you need in fill-in-the-blank foreign land, and we're going to come and bring it to you before we've ever listened." Liberals sometimes do it in foundation board rooms and political think tanks. The self-designated smartest people in the room who may have never experienced poverty, never had to heat their house off the gas-fired oven, never had to choose between buying my medicine or food for my kids, come up with blueprints for how to change other people's lives and then set out to do it having never listened. And we do it to each other in the church—"What he really needs is X." "What she really needs is Y."

Sometimes we do offer thoughts and prayers when we should be in the streets. But other times we act without listening. In fact, this very division between listening and action betrays just how little we understand about change, about our humanity, and about human relationships and what actually leads to transformation for ourselves and for others.

Listening and action aren't opposite poles—they are dependent on each other. The whole reason that people go into the streets—people who want more than just to appear virtuous or on the right side of history—the whole reason people go into the streets is so that other people wake up to what's going on. Wake up to the police brutality, or wake up to the climate crisis, or wake up to unjust treatment of immigrants. All that action is dependent on people listening, taking note, so that we all can find change together. There is no change without listening of some sort and kind, which is probably why the Spirit gifts the church with listening at the very beginning. This

divine gift of listening is the prerequisite for every powerful action that the disciples will take throughout the book of Acts when disciples encounter difference. Gentiles and Ethiopian eunuchs and outsiders who want to be baptized into a faith that the disciples once thought was only for Jews. Those early disciples listened first to the people they encountered with the holy gift of listening given by the Spirit to engage the other with grace instead of fear, with openness instead of judgment.

That's the whole challenge that humanity must deal with at this moment in time: are we going to relate to our differences through hearing and being heard or through coercion and control which eventually leads to violence? Violence through policies and systems or through fist fights and guns. It might not be any different from any other moment in time. The gift to hear and be heard is the foundation for all change. How can I, as a white man who grew up in white suburbia, ever hope to understand what my Black neighbors face in encounters with the police or racism in the workplace if I can't listen to people's experiences that are different from my own? How can I understand what a child is facing in her struggles to become herself if I can't listen deeply enough to hear her pain? How can I understand how to change the future of our planet if I can't listen to how my actions here influence the degradation of the rainforest far from my home? And how could I ever become part of anyone else's dreams to change the world if they don't understand my own story—the pain I've lived through, the journey I've traveled, the demons I've also faced?

Of course, the fear of really listening deeply to each other is that we might only see the signs of death everywhere. Death is easy to believe in Baltimore in the early part of the 21st century. It's everywhere. Cancer, murders, drug overdoses, demagogues, capital insurrections, deadly viruses that run amuck while a public health system lies in ruins. We've got rats in the streets and in the suites and we all know it. When we listen to each other—it's easy to fear that death is the single refrain that runs through all of our stories.

I should know. It's part of the listening that I do for a living. I hear the pain of people's childhoods—pain experienced a thousand different ways—abandonment, betrayal, unfulfilled dreams. I listen to people in neighborhoods east and west—abandonment by families, and governments, and neighbors and friends. I listen to people in deep grief over death—literal and figurative—all the time. Death is real and easy to see. The fear of listening too deeply is that death might be all that we find.

But if we were *listening to God*, or at least to the story that the church has been given about God all through our sacred texts, the promise of new life would be ringing in our ears. We'd notice that the resurrection story in Ezekiel—the rise of the people from out of their exile and pain—that story is given to us over and over again, not just in the texts of our Bible, but in the text of our lives. The promise of new life for our city, the promise of a new creation already at work healing the planet we are

still on a pathway to destroy, the promise of new life for you and me in the painful places. If we really listened, we would see the promise of Easter morning renewed a thousand times in all the crucified places that are so evident in our world, as if God knew we would have so much trouble believing it, we'd need to hear it again and again.

We've got to learn how to listen. Because if you trust the words of Acts, the problem with the world and the problem with the church isn't that God has neglected to give everything that is needed for change. Prophecy is given, dreams are shared, signs of God saving the world are as prevalent as the stars on a clear night, and the power to heal happens. The problem isn't that we're lacking the right people, or the right dreams, or the right direction, or the power to make it all happen. It's all here around us. The problem is that we can't always hear the grace and goodness among us; we can't always see the pathway toward justice right around us. We don't always hear the pain in ourselves or others, or the pathway to heal it. But the pathways are there. The power is present. Listening unlocks the map to find our way.

The seeds for life are planted right alongside the death that we see. The seeds for peace are right there among the people experiencing war and fear. The seeds for resurrection are right there among the people who are living through the crucified life—the drugs and the grime and the broken politics and the pain. The seeds are right there. The only way to see them and water them is to listen. Because when we listen, we can hear the dreams, we can see the visions, we can observe the hope that, miraculously, God plants deep in each soul.

That's the gift of the Spirit—not the gift of dreams and visions—they're already a part of each of us. The gift of the Spirit is to be able to hear them in yourself, in your neighbors, in those who are living through death of various kinds in the world. Listening to each other.

And while listening *must* lead to action if it's going to be real, all action taken without listening is a dead-end road. Every justice movement that ever found its legs started by listening to dreams planted deeper than the death that is so easy to see in the world. The challenge for us is that so much of the American way of dealing with pain offers the false choice of heroic individualized resilience on the one hand, or numbing ourselves through consumption on the other.

There is another way. Perhaps it's so obvious as to seem insignificant. It is the gift that God gives the church at the very beginning of the church's story. The gift that God believes is at the root of all real power for change. It's the gift of listening—across our differences.

Take time to nurture it. Practice it. Participate in it. Give and receive it. And see just how deeply the world—and you—can change and be changed by this God of grace who is in the business of resurrection.

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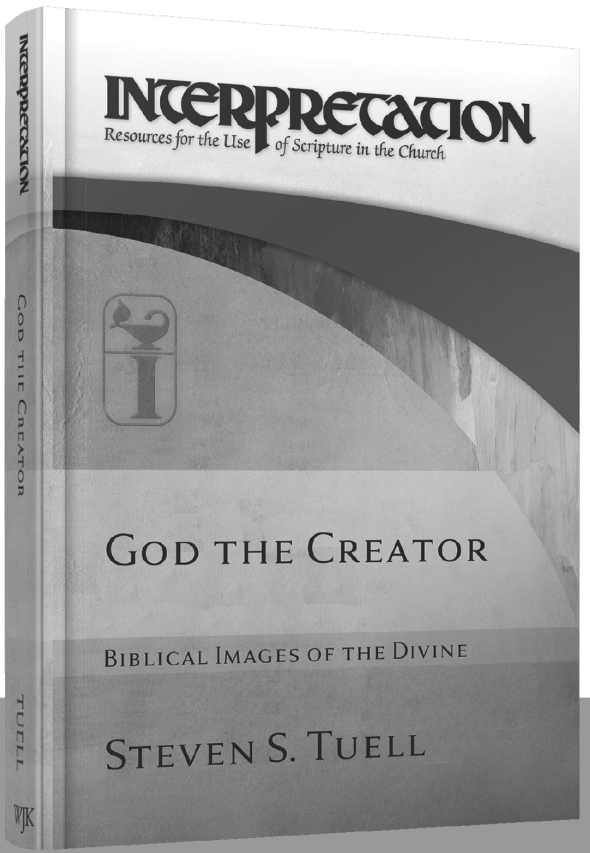

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