

May 23; Pentecost, 2010  
Gen 11:1-9; Ps 104:23-35, 37  
Acts 2:1-21; John 14:8-17

Rev. Deborah Meister

My rector in Alabama tells of a time when he was a young priest in Montgomery. One Pentecost, he read from Acts, as we read today: "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." After the service, a woman came up to him. "My mother was a Mead," she said. Now, you're laughing because there is no way that woman's mother was a member of an ancient Semitic tribe. But here's the joke: she was also right. Her mother *was* a Mede. With absolute entitlement, she claimed her place in the story, her place in God's story.

That's what Pentecost is about: being given a place in the story, no matter how incongruous that seems. It is a feast about belonging. Seven weeks earlier, when the disciples gathered around Jesus at the last supper and Philip begged him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied," that's what Philip meant: *Lord, show us something to hold on to, when you are gone, and that memory will be enough. Show us your family.* But Christ replies, "Have I been with you all this time and you still do not know me?" (John 14:8-9) Philip is looking at this man who has eaten with sinners and touched lepers and held babies and cried for the dead, this man who has entered fully into the lives of everyone he encounters, and is asking him for a mere image, a slide show of what is holy. But Christ doesn't *do* virtual encounters. Christ enters into our experience so that we can enter into his. And so Pentecost is his reply to that question: not a picture, but transformation. Not *showing* us his Father, but *giving* us his Father, full weight.

It's traditional to speak of Pentecost as a reversal of Babel, a gathering-together of all the scattered children of God, but I think it may be more accurate to say that it is a homing for all the orphaned children of God. For all of you who have ever felt alone or abandoned. For all of you who have wondered whether there is a God in the heavens, and, if there is, why God is so often silent. For those who are estranged from their families by history or separated from them by distance, for those who are estranged from themselves by history or by trepidation. Too often, we come tip-toeing into church, half-believing, almost daring to hope, craving some kind of image to hold on to for the week to come: *Show us the father, and we will have enough.* On Pentecost, we are like orphans who peer in the windows of a home to see a real family, only to be taken in, clothed, fed, given a room, adopted, assigned responsibilities, and claimed as God's own, marked as belonging to one another.

Pentecost reverses, not only Babel, but crucifixion. Christ's abandonment by his friends becomes the Spirit embracing a multitude. Abject death becomes a fiery glory. The helplessness of Christ and of his disciples becomes the power to change the world in God's name. Grief and shame become boldness and joy. How else could Peter -- Peter, of all people! The one who denied Christ three times! -- stand up in front of a thousand people from all parts of the world and proclaim the deeds of God to them with spirit and with power? "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." (Acts 2:17-18) Even upon slaves, even upon the most unlikely, abject people, God will pour out God's spirit, claims Peter -- and he can claim it with authority, because of all the people who could speak in God's name, the one who wept when the cock crowed was surely one of the most unlikely.

And that is good news for us, my friends, for all the motley, unlikely, believing, skeptical seekers of God. For we live in a skeptical age, a time which says, like Philip, *Show us the evidence.* We have become so accustomed to looking for demonstrable facts that we mistake them for truth. When we are confronted with strange stories like the ones we hear in church, when we are asked to

believe in virgin births and angel choirs and bodily resurrection and tongues of fire, surely there is in most of us, at some point, someone who hangs back like Peter in the courtyard, wondering, questioning, trying to reason it all through, even, at times, whispering in our heart, *I do not know the man.*

Friends, I have to tell you, I believe every story in Scripture, but I have never read an argument in favor of Christianity that seemed plausible to me. The teachings of Christ reveal the truths which are in my heart; they illumine my world, but reason won't get me there. I have read Aquinas, Anselm, Lewis, Chesterton -- all the great apologists for Christ -- but they are a "bridge which only takes me halfway there."<sup>1</sup> There are some things which have to be known in our bones before they can be perceived by our minds. Even St. Anselm wrote, "I do not seek to understand so that I may believe, but I believe so that I may understand."

Marilynne Robinson writes of her childhood, "It seems to me I felt God as a presence long before I had a name for him, and long before I knew words like 'faith' or 'belief.' I was aware to the point of alarm of a vast energy of intention, all around me, barely restrained...Only in church did I hear experience like mine acknowledged, in all those strange narratives, read and expounded and, for all that, opaque as figures of angels painted on gold."<sup>2</sup> She is speaking, I think, of the way God works in parables and in mystery. When Jesus taught in parables, he was creating what Marianne Moore called "imaginary gardens with real toads in them." The stories he was telling were fiction, but they bring us to truths we could not see in other ways than by entering into his stories and finding ourselves in his world, and emerging from our imaginative encounter with our pockets stuffed with toads that hop and jump even when we re-enter the terrain of our everyday. As Dominic Crossan writes, learning from Christ is not "a question even of imagining at the limits of one's imagination but rather of imagining wholly new ways of imagining."<sup>3</sup> Living in Christ is not a matter of being improved, but of being remade.

What Christ did in parables, in story, he did in fact on Pentecost. He lifted those disciples clear out of their world, filled them with his Spirit, and sent them out again with all their water turned into wine. He took a group of frightened people who huddled behind locked doors and prayed and wept, and transformed them into men and women who traveled the world, spoke to crowds, worked miracles, suffered terribly, kept on going, and became miracles themselves. Instead of reading about the people of the Bible, they stepped into its pages. Instead of hearing about the Father, they lived the divine life of God.

What God did for those disciples, he does for each one of us when we are baptized, and on every day of our lives when we open ourselves in prayer and let God in. We may not get tongues of fire, but when we bring Clover and Connor to the font this day, they will have the Spirit of God living in their hearts. So do we. *But, you will say, but, Deborah, we are not like the disciples. We are not brave, like they were. We are not confident in our faith, to go out and convert others. We are not prepared to suffer, not prepared to die.*

Neither were they.

Faith is not about having all the answers, right at the beginning. It is about stepping out into God's world, hoping and trusting that we will not be left alone in the dark. When we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," we asking to be given what we need when we need it, one crumb, one crust at a time. We may not be brave, but when we are tried, we will find strength we did not know we had, the strength of a lion or of a slaughtered lamb. We may not be confident, but when we look for God in those we meet, we will find God there. We may not be prepared to suffer, but we will,

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<sup>1</sup> Shel Silverstein, "This Bridge Will Only Take you Halfway There," *A Light in the Attic*.

<sup>2</sup> Marilynne Robinson, "Psalm Eight," in *The Death of Adam*, pp. 228-229.

<sup>3</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus*, p.12.

and we will find that we are not alone. We may not be prepared to die, but that, too, will become for us a path of fire leading us into new life.

For the meantime, we have been given the Spirit of God, and we have been given one another. So I have good news for you today: Your mother was a Mede, and your father was a wandering Aramean, and your sisters and brothers are Parthians, Cappadocians, Nigerians, Italians, Poles and Bahamians, young, old, rich, poor, male, female, walking and speaking and differently abled, hopeful, despondent, dressed in suits and dressed in rags. There is no corner of the earth where you will be a stranger, for on this day God has given you all the people of his hand. And there is no fragment of human experience which must be alien to you, for God has given you his Spirit which searches all our hearts. And there is no tomorrow -- not even one ringed in fire -- which you need fear, for God is there already. Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (I Cor 15:57)