

Pentecost 2009

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Acts 2:1-21; Ps 104:25-35, 37

Rom 8:22-27; John 15:26-28, 16:4b-15

About five and a half centuries before the birth of Christ, a man named Ezekiel had an extraordinary vision. As he was seated by the River Chebar, in Babylon, a storm cloud came rushing from the east, with lightning flashing from it, and, in the center, something like amber. And as it drew near, Ezekiel saw that it was nothing less than the chariot of God. It was drawn by four living creatures, with four wings and four faces. And the chariot descended, and beneath its crystal dome there was a living being that seemed to take human form, and it spoke to Ezekiel out of the storm: "Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel." (Ezek 1:1-2:3) And when the being had finished speaking, Ezekiel found himself among the exiles, and sat stunned for seven days.

Of course he was stunned! The Hebrew people had believed for centuries that God lived in Jerusalem. He inhabited the Holy of Holies of the Temple, and people who wanted to make a vow or beg forgiveness for sin or make an offering had to come to him there. And so, when they were exiled to Babylon in 586 or 587, the Hebrews feared that they had lost their God as well as their homeland. If God lived in Jerusalem, and they did not, there might as well have been an angel with a flaming sword standing between them and their Eden. And so, when the throne of God descended upon Ezekiel -- *in Babylon* -- Ezekiel received more than an ordinary vision: he learned, and the people of Israel learned through him, that there is no place that is beyond the reach of God, no people too broken to receive God's healing, no boundary to the fierce love and justice of the Almighty. In the light of Ezekiel's words, the people of Israel found strength to gather together as a people, to preserve their customs and their ways, to "hope for [a future they did]...not see,...[to] wait for it with patience." (Rom 8:22) When they went into exile, surely the people of God saw it as death, but in the hands of the Almighty, it became a powerful birth in faithfulness.

And so it should come as no surprise that, fifty days after the Resurrection, on the feast of Shavuot, when the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples like tongues of fire, and they all began to babble in foreign languages, Peter turned to the words of 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." (Acts 2:17-18) *I will pour out my spirit upon the whole people of Israel*, implies God, but that's not what he actually says. What God says is that he will give the Spirit to old men and to slaves, to women and to the young: *vision will belong to the people on the margins*. Pentecost is the day that God's spirit came to people who were not central to Judaism, to the Diaspora, those who lived in an alien culture. The Jews who lived in Jerusalem had no need of tongues; the gift of language, the gift multiplicity, was given so that there would no longer be exiles. There might be people who lived far from one another and from their homeland, but the emotional freight of exile, the gnawing sense of being separated from yourself and your true home and all that makes life beautiful -- that was gone forever.

This is a good thing to remember, because our society seems to move people around with careless abandon. The pressures of work and education mean that many of us live far from the land of our birth, far from our relatives. We become fluent in more than one language, more than one culture, more than one industry. Even the current recession is a kind of distancing, removing many of us from our career, our lifestyle, the future we had imagined. In times like these, we need to remember that "neither life nor death..., nor things present, nor things to come, nor anything else in all creation [can] separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38-39).

And we need to remember this as Christians, too, because Christianity is moving away from the center of our culture. A poll released in 2009<sup>1</sup> indicates that the number of Americans who claim no religious preference at all has almost doubled since 1990, with 34.2 million people, or 15% of Americans, choosing not to participate in religious activity of any kind. New Jersey, in fact, is a hotbed of the new secularism.

Scholars of religion keep calling us “the post-Constantinian church.” Now, in one sense, this is self-evident; the Emperor Constantine died in 337, which means we have been post-Constantinian for a *long* time. But it’s also a label which describes a significant shift in the way Christianity fits into our world. Constantine was the person who made it legal to be a Christian. Overnight, in 313, Christianity went from being a small, persecuted sect of people on the fringe, to being an official, even a privileged, religion of the Roman Empire. Suddenly, Christians worshiped in basilicas rather than in living rooms, were being promoted to high positions in the government, were even able to obtain social status from what, a few years earlier, had been a mark of stigma.

It was the beginning of Christendom, a world-order (or, at least, a European order) in which Christians held the power, made the laws, and controlled the culture, while everyone else was being forced into a position which was marginal, at best. It is that world-order which is coming to an end in our time, as globalization and multiculturalism shape a world in which no one group has a monopoly on authority. In many ways, that is a good thing. Nobody here would think it was right to exclude a nominee from a judicial position because she was Jewish, or a candidate from elected office because he practiced Buddhism. In a pluralistic world, it is not right that persons should be excluded from any role in our society (except religious leadership) because of their religion. But it does compel us to re-examine the ways we live in our world, both as individuals and as a church, the ways we reach out (or do not reach out) to share the life-giving news of our faith.

Rowan Williams asks, “What if the life that fuels the church through prayer is not the routine prayer of the worshiping community, not even the prayer of the religious orders, but moments of exposure or insight, or of desperately needy openness to God on the part of very irregular Christians?”<sup>2</sup> In other words, what if the vibrancy of the church comes, not from the people in the center, but from those on the margins? What if it is the cries of the poor which draw us out of deadening complacency, the sharp questions of those struggling to believe which test our theology against the experience of the world, the desperation of our own dry hearts which leads us inexorably toward the living water of Christ? If those things are true, then the fact that we are re-entering the margins of our culture may be the very thing which goads our complacent Christian communities into life, breaks us open to the invigorating creativity of the Spirit of God.

The Spirit did not come upon the disciples while they were fat and happy and palling around with Jesus. It did not come upon the devout while they were offering sacrifices at the Temple. Only when they had been broken with grief, only when their hope had been stripped by death and then bewildered by resurrection, only when they no longer knew what to do did the rush of flames envelop them. They learned new languages, new ways to preach the Gospel; they received new powers, new ways to show the love of God; they left the forms of worship they had inherited, and created new ways to bear life to the many and various people of God.

And if this is true in of the church as a community, how much more true is it of the lives of each individual Christian. Most of us, I think, tend to see certain parts of ourselves as better than others, more Christ-like, closer to being finished. But there is a life in what is raw, an energy in the rough edges that have not yet been sanded off, that may be closer to the heart of God. Williams continues, “[maybe] those parts of our own individual experience that seem least pious or ‘together’

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<sup>1</sup> American Religious Identification Survey, 2008; see <http://www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org>

<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams, *Ponder These Things*, p.48.

may be the points at which we are exposed to God, and so the points from which we most truly come to live in Christ....It may well be that in our honest helplessness there we come closer to the real well of life.”<sup>3</sup> When St. Paul writes that “the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words,” (Rom 8:26) he is speaking about the point at which we can not see to chart our own path, and no longer have strength to carry ourselves. At that point, at that very point of bewildered exile from all we have been and have dreamed of being, the Holy Spirit takes over, and intercedes for us before the throne of God.

The writer Anne Lamott tells of a seven-year-old girl who got lost. She “ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived, but she couldn’t find a single landmark. She was very frightened. Finally a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car, and they drove around until she finally saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, ‘You could let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here.’”<sup>4</sup>

Underneath all the fire and the babble of languages, *that* is Pentecost: God’s gift to us of a place from which we can always find home, if we look hard enough. It might not look like the home we have always known. The church might be different from the ones we grew up in: might sing different songs, pray in different words, be filled with the babble of children’s voices speaking in many languages. The family, the workplace, the community might not be the one we had thought we desired. But if we listen to the Spirit of God dwelling within us, then the unfamiliar is only the face of someone who is not yet a friend, the future only a name for the place where we will recover all that we thought we had lost, and receive it back, gilded with tongues of fire.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.49-50.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*, p.55.