

“FALL AFRESH ON ME”

Acts 2:1-21; Mark 14:3-9

**Market Square Presbyterian Church in the City of
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania**

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Do you remember what happened September 11, 2001? Or November 22, 1963 for those of us whose decades are piling up? Of course you do except I am not referring to airplanes flying into buildings in New York and Washington and a grassy field in western Pennsylvania. I am not alluding to the murder of a president. I am recalling the explosion of services and gatherings held in churches and other houses of worship on the evenings of and in the days following those and other shocking or troubling events. When things get strange or scary in the world, we often seek out religion that is comforting and familiar. When things are new or threatening, we invoke the God who is old and established. When nothing seems to be like it used to be, we sing about an unchanging Deity...

*Change and decay in all around I see,
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.¹*

Maybe that is what makes Pentecost difficult for us fully to embrace or appreciate. Maybe that is why sanctuaries are not as full at Pentecost as they are on Christmas Eve and Easter morn. Pentecost is not warm, fuzzy, and cozy. The word “Pentecost” is a noun but in its character it is a verb. Pentecost is where the rubber hits the road in the life of faith.

We can marvel at the Christmas incarnation and exclaim over the Easter resurrection, but Pentecost compels a personal response and a public dimension to our faith. It makes disciples of us. It grafts us into the body of Christ. It commissions us and sends us into the world. It gets us involved in the Lord’s work. It causes us to revise and to re-prioritize our lives, perspectives, values, and actions. When, at Pentecost, God pours out God’s Spirit on us, we are made partners

¹ Part of the 1847 text by Henry Francis Lyte to the hymn “Abide With Me,” #836 in Glory to God hymnal

with the Lord in calling forth by words and deeds the peaceable kingdom of God in the world. As we allow God's poured-out Spirit to soak into us, our lives change and so, too, the world.

It is a challenging life into which the Spirit of God propels us because, as Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann says, "*The world for which we so carefully have prepared is being taken away from us, by the grace of God.*"² The waters of the world are being roiled these days and virtually every boat rocked.

So much of what we thought we knew of the world no longer reflects reality. So much of what we have learned in life seems outdated. So many of the cultural conventions and social values on which we were raised and counted have been nullified or replaced. Seismic changes in politics, economics, technology, climate, church, cultural institutions, and education threaten our ability to comprehend and integrate it all. As I listen to people talk about the state of affairs these days, hope seems to be in diminishing supply.

But, remember what Brueggemann said: the change and upheaval all around us is courtesy of *the grace of God*. The Spirit of God is in the midst of it all. That does not mean that God is behind the violence like last night's terror attack in London. But it does mean that with God's blessing the old is passing away so that the new may come. We cannot join the defenders of the old exclusivist, racist, privileged ways. We are to be the heralds and harbingers of gospel ways. Christians are not sideliners or wallflowers. Being a Christian is not a spectator sport.

These are times of testing and trusting. Life has been good more or less for most of us for most of our lives but it has not been that way for many of the world's people who have suffered from inequality, poverty, prejudice, sexism, and many other tyrannies. God wants it to be more evenly well in the world and in God's mysterious ways is accomplishing God's purpose.³

The Spirit of God who is also the Spirit of Christ is gusting through church and world and is, I do firmly believe, preparing the way for a profoundly new world shaped by the gospel of love. Pentecost is the church's affirmation that the Spirit of Christ so clearly alive in Jesus also is pervasively and persuasively alive in the world today and in a big way through the church. The Pentecost Spirit of God is being poured out on us and it is God's call on our lives to respond.

The Spirit of the radical and reforming Christ who makes all things new is blowing across the face of the earth and into our souls but too often we resist instead of allowing the Spirit to fall afresh on us. We can do so no longer. Not when climate accords are sidelined. Not when

² I first heard Dr. Brueggemann say this at the Sprunt Lectures in 1987 at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia.

³ Isaiah 55:10-11

bigotry is given breath. Not when the poor suffer the policy whims of morally inept politicians. Not when access to healthcare is treated as a perk for the wealthy rather than a human right for everyone. Not when the dignity and personhood of people and peoples are circumscribed because of race, class, religion, sexual orientation, or national origin. The Spirit Wind is blowing and the church may not run for shelter. Rather, in faith, we cry out to the Lord, "*Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.*"⁴

Resisting the Spirit of God may be why the church seems to some too tame, too tepid, and too often irrelevant. The church more than ever needs poets, prophets, and seers. These are perilous yet pregnant times. It is why Peter, in trying to set the stage for that first Pentecost and the early days of the Christian church, appealed to the poetry of the Old Testament Book of Joel:

*There will be portents in the heavens above
and signs on the earth beneath,
blood, fire, and smoky mist.*

*The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's
great and glorious day.*⁵

Only poets talk of moons turning to blood, but we all notice the deepening brutality and violence of life today. Only poets speak of smoky mists and of the sun turning to darkness, but many of us suspect our nation is losing its way and sway in the world. In messy and anxious times, like those of the early Christians and like ours, it is the poets who tell us most profoundly the truth we may not want to hear but know is so. But, in the Spirit of God, we do not give up or lose hope.

How do we respond to bloody moons and darkened suns and these precarious times? We can put on blinders and pretend nothing is wrong in the world that ramping up a war on terror and building tall walls and propping up privilege cannot fix. We can try to create for ourselves an oasis of personal escape with an illusion of safety amid the tumult. We can appeal to nostalgia and try to recover the way things were. Or we can welcome the presence, power, and promise of the Spirit of Christ into our lives and commit ourselves to following wherever the Spirit leads us and however the Spirit needs us. We allow the Spirit of God to fall afresh on us and join God in creating the new earth.⁶

⁴ Text by Daniel Iverson (1926) to the hymn, "Spirit of the Living God," #288 in Glory to God hymnal

⁵ Acts 2:19-20 (in reference to Joel 2:30)

⁶ Revelation 21:1

Here is where the story about the woman in our gospel reading today⁷ is so helpful. I do not like it that Mark does not give us her name. Even the owner of the home in which the story takes place, a minor detail in the story, is identified. But such was the lowly status of women in those days that even women of means often were relegated to anonymity. Maybe that was a contributing reason for her doing what she did. What she did was to barge into a dinner in Simon's home where Jesus was eating, break open an alabaster jar of expensive perfume, and pour it on her Lord.

Immediately the disciples and the other guests condemned the woman. She should have sold the exquisite perfume, they complained to Jesus, and used the proceeds to help the poor. But Jesus refused to take their bait. Instead, he said to them, "*You always have the poor with you and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish.*"⁸ Jesus was not suggesting the disciples and dinner guests should be undisturbed about the poor. He was telling them that he and the woman were after something bigger than almsgiving and charity.

The disciples complained that the woman should have sold the perfume and then, with the earnings, written a check to the soup kitchen and the homeless shelter. But frankly, neither the unnamed woman nor Jesus had much interest in trying to make a little difference in the world as the disciples were suggesting. They were seeking a different world, a whole new world in which love reigns and justice rolls down like an ever-flowing stream and women's names are as important as men's and no one lives in want of food or home or dignity or opportunity or joy.

We are setting the bar too low if as Christians our only desire is to make a difference in the world. Wanting simply to make a difference in the world is tantamount to parceling out our gifts in little measuring cups so as to leave our lives and the world mostly unchanged while feeling good about ourselves and our altruism. Prodded and guided by the Spirit of God, Jesus wants to usher in a whole new world in which the ways that individuals, communities, and nations relate to each other and all others and even to the natural world create harmony, hope, and peace. It looks a lot like what scripture calls the kingdom of God.

Jesus is the gospel in the flesh, good news to all people, for he helps us to become more fully human. But he is good news especially to those whom our societies consign to the margins, the edges, the periphery of life for he does not merely want to sprinkle the present world with charity that leaves it largely unchanged. He wants the proud to be humbled, the lowly to be lifted, the races to be reconciled, the poor to be prosperous, the lonely to be loved, the lost to be found, the hungry to be filled, the bored to become passionate again. He wants people to love God because

⁷ Mark 14:3-9

⁸ Mark 14:7

he knows that to really love God whom we cannot see means we must love our sisters and brothers we can see.

Loving God means loving our neighbors - our Muslim neighbors, Jewish neighbors, conservative neighbors, progressive neighbors, immigrant neighbors, gay neighbors, straight neighbors, brown neighbors, black neighbors, white neighbors, all colors of neighbors, even Phillies fans neighbors - as ourselves.⁹ For as we allow the Spirit of God to fall afresh on us and live and love in the manner of Jesus, the old world passes away and the new one of which the prophets and poets spoke and still speak comes.

As Christians we do not content ourselves with wanting to make a difference in the world. We are invited to pray and to live, as Jesus did, toward a new world in which all may flourish. Pentecost celebrates the unleashing, the loosing, the lavishing of the Spirit of Christ on the church, on us, the Spirit whose passion and power is love and by whom all things are made new.

If the moon is getting bloodier these days, if the sun is getting darker, there is nothing more important for us to do than to let the Spirit of God fall afresh on us with all of its attendant and transforming power. Remember, Brueggemann says, if the world in which we were prepared to live is passing away, *it is passing away by God's grace* and, behold, a new world is emerging that will please God's heart. Hope abounds. This is our faith and our faith has more credibility than all of the doomsdayers and naysayers put together because it holds the power and promise of God.

Let us conclude with a prayer. I invite you to repeat after me:

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.
Melt me. Mold me. Fill me. Use me.
Melt me. Mold me. Fill me. Use me.
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

Fall afresh on us! Happy Pentecost!

Amen.

⁹ Mark 12:30-31