

KGL+
Sermon
Trinity Church Boston
Year B, Pentecost
May 19, 2024

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together always be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

“On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”¹

Those are author Annie Dillard’s words, and while not scripture, they hold a truth we don’t often speak of when we gather together to pray; when we arrive out of breath and windblown from St James Avenue’s peculiar weather corridor², and hustle to make ourselves smoothed out and presentable as we enter into the quiet of this room.

In two thousand years, we have grown further from our origin story as a church—we’ve entered the comfort of the majority, Christianity generally being ubiquitous in our region, rather than the radical, homegrown exception. We read the story of Pentecost each year, vying with one another to escape being lector for that day, what with all the place names which tie up our tongues, and don’t particularly hold the same relevance and meaning for us any longer. We wear red, celebrate baptisms, celebrate what we associate as the birthday of the church—when the followers of Jesus no longer saw themselves as followers, but as the very incarnation of Jesus’ promises to them. Jesus wasn’t the church, THEY were the church.

And the church was born that day, out of chaos, and fire, and confusion.

Not every birth story is one which resembles ‘Silent Night’.

We too often can forget the primal nature which characterized the God who created us, and in whose image we are each fashioned, and whom we worship and from whom the Spirit

¹ Dillard, Annie. *Teaching a Stone to Talk*.

² This is all my own experience, but on occasion I Google my experiences to see how off I am—gentle reader, I am not mistaken. MIT research backs me up on the wind at the Clarendon and St James Avenue intersections: <https://web.mit.edu/chenxing/www/natural.html>

descends—a God of Genesis, bringing forth land, separating the waters above and the waters below, populating the oceans and the forests³—the God who arrived unannounced at tents in the wilderness⁴, wrestled with us in the deep of the night⁵, the one who was seen as a pillar of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night⁶, the one who divided the waters so that liberation might be had⁷.

Even according to Jesus, the God we worship rent the Temple curtain from top to bottom, transfigured Jesus, and both created and tamed the storms on the sea. The psalm this morning gives us a hint of the God who is more than the God we find in this building—the one who created that leviathan, who makes the mountains tremble. As C.S. Lewis said, ‘He is not a tame lion.’⁸

And it is this same God—the God of fire and cacophony-- which Jesus says will comfort the terrified disciples, and accompany them into all that they will do and be and become.

Church, if we see Pentecost as our origin story, then we are a people born of both disruption and assurance; the Spirit poured out on all, and the Spirit of terrific intimacy; we are untethered from form, and yet always accompanied.

It would have been kind to Pentecost preachers for scripture to center only one image or other, but as experience has taught all of us, circumstances and outcomes are not always uniform in impact, or resulting in simple dichotomies, labeled clearly as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, or ‘hard’ or ‘easy’. They are often both, and more, and morph again and again with time and reflection.

Our lineage is anchored in that Spirit which descended upon Jesus at his baptism, which descended upon us at our baptisms, which descended yesterday on the body of Christ who elected our new diocesan bishop in this room yesterday, which will descend upon the eight children baptized this morning, and which comes in every time of anxiety when we would prefer to not say ‘Here I am Lord’ when our names are called to venture into new territory. In our windows and artwork, the Spirit is portrayed as the dove descending, the same one which once held an olive branch of hope in a flooded, desolate landscape. It is the one in the Gospel of John who comes in assurance—the Comforter, the Advocate, the Paraclete, who will hold us, guide us and lead us so gently into the unyielding truth of God’s love for us, and for the world.

³ Genesis 1:6ff

⁴ Genesis 18:1-18

⁵ Genesis 32:22-32

⁶ Exodus 13:1ff

⁷ Exodus 14:21ff

⁸ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Many thanks to John Reine and Jim Meyer, who, at the 8am service referenced this phrase, and I obediently scooped it up and added it for our two subsequent services.

This is what we are made of, what we were made *for*, church. Chaotic connection, anchored in the assurance of comfort. Chaotic connection, anchored in the assurance of comfort. Say that three times fast. No, what that is friends, is love. What that is friends, is grace. What that is, is God, here, now, made incarnate in the realness of the ordinary, not fairy-tale-ending world. On this day, we remember together that though we may be removed from the comfort of the physicality of Jesus beside us, we have been thrust into the integrity work of Jesus **within** us. Jesus **through** us. Jesus found **among** the collective us.

And this is who we are called to be.

We might need crash helmets after all.

But consider: a people who are forged of fire and comfort might just be the exact people who should be called to bear love into this world: a world which will not get less nuanced; or less complicated; or less divisive; or less vengeful; or less reactionary. God's gift to God's people is not in clearing the pathway for an easy existence, a journey of indefinite niceness and generic kindness, allowing us to cross our fingers that it will get better before it's our turn in line to deal with it all. God gave each of God's people the tools for loving such a world—so that the fray doesn't scare us, for the very reason that we have been there before. And even if we haven't walked this path ourselves, God's lasting gift was to give us one another—companions on the journey—the Church incarnate-- who will be that voice saying, 'Fear not' to us, so that we can hold one another's hands as we respond with more courage than we would have alone, 'Here I am Lord. Send me.'

One of the strange gifts of this building is that it is in the middle of it all. Construction, commuters, a bizarre wind tunnel which, you might notice, is the one place where you can find the wind blowing in opposite directions at the very same time at an alarming velocity. So many come into this building to find sanctuary from the elements—a moment of quiet amidst sirens, rain, sensory overwhelm. And we will always offer that gift of respite.

But notice, once in a while, the rumble beneath our feet during our service, during Communion. The ground shakes ever so slightly while we pray together. Yes, we know it's the T lines running across Back Bay⁹—just under and around this church—but on occasion, I invite you to forget that fact. Imagine that the fire of Pentecost, the upheaval of that gathering, isn't quite as far away from us as two thousand years might suggest—imagine, when we receive the sacrament, when we kneel or stand beside strangers, offering out our empty hands, and having them filled without evaluation or preconditions that maybe, just maybe, the waking God, as Dillard referenced, is

⁹ I don't have a great source for this, other than feeling the rumble regularly (mostly by the altar, less often in the pews)-- but if you'd like to go down a rabbit hole with me again, I appreciated understanding more of the transportation history of Boston (good and ill), much of which centered around Copley Square and the rail yards, where the Prudential Center now sits: <http://www.bostonstreetcars.com/copley-square.html>

closer to us that we imagine—ready to draw us into places from which we cannot, and perhaps should not, return.

Amen.