

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως  
Pentecost A (31 May 2020)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

The Rev. Todd Foster

*Time-stamp: <2020-05-30 Sat 12:16>*

**Collect**

Almighty God, on this day you opened the way of eternal life to every race and nation by the promised gift of your Holy Spirit: Shed abroad this gift throughout the world by the preaching of the Gospel, that it may reach to the ends of the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

*Numbers 11:24-30, Acts 2:1-21, John 20:19-23, Psalm 104:25-35, 37*

**1 (Read Collect)**

**2 Transformative Moments**

A couple weeks ago I went down to Millville to join a congratulatory parade for Scott Carr, a member of St. Thomas' who graduated from seminary this semester. Although he's had jobs before, and worked his way through graduate school, now Scott is looking to begin his career in earnest. The pandemic prevented Scott from celebrating and acknowledging this momentous milestone in the way he was surely expecting to do. But the milestone occurred anyway, and Scott's life has been forever changed nonetheless.

This week I joined another congratulatory parade, along with a number of others for Jimmy McCarthy, another member of St. Thomas'. Jimmy had just worked his last day for the United States Postal Service. After more than 34 years of faithful service, he was *completing* his career. The pandemic prevented Jimmy from celebrating and acknowledging this momentous milestone in the way he was surely expecting to do. But the milestone occurred anyway, and his life has been forever changed nonetheless.

As a Christian church, we are all about transformation. The Feast of Pentecost, which we celebrate today, is all about when that transformation happens to us. That's what is represented in the stained glass window that is at the very center of our chancel, above the altar, with a dove descending. Whereas Advent and Christmas, Epiphany and Lent and Easter all tell the story of something very important that happened long ago, Pentecost tells the story of now, how those past events continue to inform and shape the present.

Pentecost is the Bible's account of that transformative moment that happens to each of us at baptism, when God's Holy Spirit is poured out upon every single one of us, and *our* lives are forever changed.

### 3 Pentecost = Change

Now when those first disciples of Jesus experienced Pentecost, it came with a violent wind and with fire. A hurricane and an inferno. It came in the aftermath of the most difficult Lent ever, when all their hopes and beliefs and expectations had been shredded, leaving behind nothing but chaos and fear and wreckage. The crucifixion was a shock, utterly unintelligible, breaking down their very understanding of reality and leaving them adrift. It was precisely on top of that chaos and wreckage that the disciples were finally ready, finally receptive, for God to do something new in them. Like God creating the world from out of the chaos of the waters, like God forging the Israelites into a new nation in the barrenness of those 40 years in the desert. Like a new building rising up on a construction site that was first cleared and leveled so that a foundation could be poured and a sturdy edifice built. That's what happened to the disciples. That's how they were prepared, finally, to receive the Holy Spirit.

When Pentecost comes to us, when we experience the coming of the Holy Spirit over and over throughout our lives, we should not be surprised if we find we are most receptive, most ready to see and hear and notice God at work, during those times of chaos and wreckage and pain in our lives. Jesus told us this, saying "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." (Mt 9.12 NJB) It is those who know themselves as lost who are most ready to be found. Those times when we have either let go or, more often, had wrested out of our grasp, those comforts and conveniences and assurances we rely on for a sense of well-being. When instead we are suffering loss or heart-ache or fear, when we are dealing with rejection or self-doubt or financial catastrophe, when we are mourning a death or reeling from the loss of a job or struggling with addiction — these are often the times when we are most likely to let go of what has come before and to be ready to see the Holy Spirit come down and speak a creative new word into our lives. A violent wind and fire are often the pre-cursors, the signs, the reminders that God is at work. Often it is precisely then that our lives will be transformed and we will be forever changed.

### 4 Change

This is a common theme of the Gospel message. Jesus Christ brings change to our lives. And we resist change because it's painful. It hurts. We make our peace with how things are and we get stuck there, making the best of whatever situation we're in. Afraid that any change would only be even *more* uncomfortable. Very often we, and when I say "we" here I mean "I," very often we resist the Gospel of Jesus Christ because we have no idea about the promises of God, no idea about how much better God wants our lives to be, and we are only afraid that things could get worse. So it takes a special pain, an especially violent wind, to knock us completely down, to make us turn loose our grip on what we had before, to empty our hands to be ready to receive the new thing God wants to do in our lives.

Covid-19 is a great example of this, right? A violent wind, a fire, that nobody wanted, that has killed 370,000 people around the world, 102,000 of those in the United States with numbers still rising among parts of the nation, and more than a tenth of the U.S. total of deaths right here in New Jersey.

Many people, many politicians want to bury their heads in the sand, deny that anything is happening and get “back to normal.” I’ll note that this week the news did indeed take us “back to normal,” pausing in its breathless coverage of the Corona Virus to remind us of what “normal” looks like in the United States. Christian Cooper threatened with violence for the crime of bird-watching while black in Central Park. Ahmaud Arbery hunted down for jogging while black in Georgia. Breonna Taylor shot eight times in the middle of the night in her own home in Kentucky. And George Floyd being murdered in broad daylight on a sidewalk in Minnesota.

After weeks of low-grade anxiety from news about the Corona Virus, hearing this week’s stories felt like a punch to the gut. Oh yeah: that’s what passes for “normal” for us. Sleeping or waking, night or day, America’s original sin keeps on bearing fruit; it is the gift that keeps on giving. Friends, I don’t want to go back to “normal.”

Pentecost is about leaving behind “normal.” It’s about leaving behind what you knew and clung to before. It’s about leaving behind a life shaped by death and scarcity, division and fear. It’s about leaving behind insults and blaming, violence and contempt. It’s about leaving behind a life subject to the principalities and powers, to the Caesars of our world. It’s about rejecting an ethic that would value “re-opening the economy” above the lives of the elderly. It’s about rejecting the blasphemous, satanic narrative that certain people are more dangerous or less deserving than others. It’s about acknowledging our complicity in systems of injustice and inequity, systems that we had learned to ignore because the ways they privileged us came to seem normal. It’s about rejecting systems whose fundamental lack of fairness was made glaringly obvious once again as data has come streaming in about the wildly disproportionate effects of Covid-19 on people of color: not for any genetic predisposition, but due to the comprehensive, long-standing circumstances of discrimination and oppression.

We gather as church to become a new kind of people. In Pentecost, God actively, spectacularly knocked down the barriers that separated people different from one another, including differences based on ethnicity and national origin. So we come to church not to be with people just like us, but precisely because it is here at church that we will encounter the broader diversity of God’s creative work in one another. Together we work out our spiritual muscles in worship, prayer, study, service and fellowship. We are training for life in the Kingdom of God. We are training our reflexes and building muscle memory so that when we encounter evil in the world, we’ll know what to do, and have the capacity, the strength, the courage to do it. Disciples of Jesus Christ are those who are working to bring a new reality into being through word and deed and, like Jesus, suffering for others.

## 5 Celebrating Change

Pentecost begins with a violent wind and with fire, a burning down of the systems that perpetuate injustice. You see that written all across the Bible from start to finish. We might find that written in our own lives, as well.

Pentecost continues with the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon all flesh: male and female, young and old, wealthy and impoverished, people from every nation under heaven. Pentecost enables all of us to know God intimately, to speak the words of God, to see visions of the Kingdom of God, to dream the dreams of God.

Some people may not understand the things we say and do in this era after Pentecost. They may sneer and think us foolish. That’s OK: it goes with the territory. If we *really* do our jobs well, we will face opposition, persecution, crucifixion. Our invitation is to take up our crosses, to follow Jesus, and to discover that in that path lies something far better than we have ever known before. In that path lies the Kingdom of God.

Pentecost is a holy day, a feast day, a celebratory parade. We may not celebrate it quite the way we had hoped to this year, but we are celebrating it nonetheless. On Pentecost God's Holy Spirit comes down with a violent wind and fire, changing hearts and changing minds. The experience of meeting God is always challenging, always humbling, always terrifying. It is a milestone in each of our journeys of faith, and every time we encounter it, our lives will be forever changed.

**Amen.**