

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Pentecost (5 June 2022)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

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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.

Acts 2:1-21(22-47), Psalm 104:25-35,37, Romans 8:14-17, John 14:8-17,(25-27)

Are we there yet?

My family just got back from Texas this week. Unfortunately, I couldn't go because when they left I was still isolating after COVID. But we make that trip often, and we have driven it several times. When you have family scattered across several states, regular travel is just a part of life. This means my children grew up like I did, spending hours and days in the back of the car with little agency. And that leads to the dreaded question, "Are we there yet?"

It's a question I still ask. As an adult, I try not to ask it out loud. But sometimes I do. Sometimes I ask it while I'm traveling. Sometimes I ask it while looking forward to a meal. Sometimes I ask it while being treated by a doctor or dentist. Sometimes I ask it silently while sitting in Centering Prayer: even though it's only 20 minutes! All the time I ask it while striving to grow in my life in the Spirit. Are we there yet?

This is the situation we find in Jerusalem on that Day of Pentecost so many years ago. Jewish people were gathered from all over the world to celebrate the feast and to ask, "Are we there yet?" They were waiting for something: they were waiting for the promised Messiah. They were waiting for a King, a descendant of David, who would once again sit on the throne in Jerusalem and vanquish Israel's enemies. God had promised and they were true believers, asking: Are we there yet?

I can relate to these believers as I pursue my own life, my own hopes and dreams and expectations. Some Christians believe true faith will necessarily result in health and wealth and vocational success. Some Christians believe true faith will result in extraordinary experiences like *glossalalia*, speaking in strange tongues, and in miraculous healings. I absolutely believe none of these are beyond God's capacity to do. But my own experience suggests that experiences like these are not the necessary, normative, or inevitable results of faith.

Not the “good life” you were looking for

I have various mentors I look up to, people who walked alongside me during difficult seasons of my life and modeled life in the Spirit. I am struck by the disappointments they encountered and how their faith stood out even more strongly as a result of their disappointment. Jack wasn't elected Bishop, and the Center for Spiritual Growth he started instead no longer exists. Edward was chased out of vocational ministry because he refused to play by the rules of white supremacy in the deep South of 60 years ago. Joanne was hurt deeply by a bitter divorce from an Episcopal priest. Yet from each of their disappointments and their pains, each of these somehow brought forth a grace and a loving kindness that encouraged me in *my* dark places and pointed me toward what God was doing in my life!

In our account of that Pentecost following Jesus' death and Resurrection, Peter and the disciples are asking a similarly hard thing of their Jewish brothers and sisters. Instead of a throne there was a cross. Instead of conquest there was crucifixion. Instead of an eternal kingdom, there was death. They were still waiting. Are we there yet?

Resurrection

So Peter sets out to explain: This strange phenomenon you hear, untutored fishermen speaking the languages of Europe, Africa, Arabia, and Asia: this is a fulfillment of prophecy. It is a sign that we have arrived. The prophet Joel said: “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon *all* flesh...” “Then *everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Fulfillment may not look like what you had hoped for or expected. All your dreams built up and lovingly cherished. In fact, says Peter, it's better than that. Your dreams were too small, your expectations too low. God chose not just the Jews, but *all flesh* and *everyone who calls on the name of the Lord*. What God has done, is doing all around you, has already arrived and is just waiting for you to open your eyes and to notice it! You are asking “Are we there yet?” and the answer is a resounding “Yes!”

Jesus allowed the people to lash out with their small imaginations upon his body. And how did he respond to all those betrayers and abandoners? All those who clamored for his death? They were now being invited to take part in the fruits of his *victory*. In the Resurrection Jesus became exactly that victorious king who would reign eternally, but even more surprising and more powerful than anyone had dreamed of. Anyone but God, that is.

The circle of those who knew Jesus as Lord began with those who had known him best but it quickly began expanding.

In Acts 2, Peter addresses a Jewish audience from around the world, many of whom believed in Jesus.

In Acts 8, Philip brings the Gospel to the people of Samaria – a people who were discriminated against because of their mixed-race ancestry and their questionable religious practices. Yet the Holy Spirit fell upon them in power.

Late in Acts 8, Philip is again carried by the Holy Spirit to preach to someone utterly foreign: an African person of non-binary sexual identity. That person, too, went on their way rejoicing in God's love and acceptance.

Finally, in Acts 10, Peter proclaims the Gospel to the Gentiles. That was when the church had to struggle through its most difficult, most surprising discernment yet. Were Gentiles really included in God's plan? St. Thomas', this was when the circle of God's people was expanded to include you and me!

Today, led by the Holy Spirit, Christ's Church continues the challenging work of the apostles even as we celebrate Pride month. For every person, every group, every identity that has been told "you don't belong" or "you are not worthy" or "you should be ashamed," we respond, "Jesus died and rose for you." For those who felt erased, uncared-for, or ignored, we point to Jesus as their companion on the way, and us too. No matter what else happens, Resurrection, God's dream for *all flesh* and *everyone who calls on the name of the Lord* is the point of our story.

The Kingdom of Heaven is Here!

My mentors I mentioned earlier were those who had opened their eyes. I don't know that God caused the pains they experienced, but I think that God redeemed those pains and used them to help my friends look up and notice the greater treasures of life in God's kingdom. Each of these were faithful, even in their pain, and somehow found victory in God's love for them. I am inspired by the faith and the spiritual stamina they displayed in order to find that victory. That is the faith toward which I am striving, yearning, and training. That is life in the Spirit.

Though I still ask often enough in my prayers, "Are we there yet?" the resounding answer of Scripture and the Church is, "the Kingdom of God is *here*." We don't have to wait any longer. That Kingdom, which Jesus announced as near, fully arrived in his Resurrection, and the apostles were the core of a new community dedicated to living in that new reality. When we gather as church, we declare and practice learning how to notice, to perceive, to celebrate, that the Kingdom of Heaven is here, that God reigns, that Jesus is Lord, that we are living under God's rule if only we will open our eyes to notice!

Are we there yet? Yes! The Kingdom of Heaven is here! God has accomplished God's purpose and even when life hurts, God is still at work. If the salvation of God doesn't look like what you were expecting, well, that's the good news. Your dreams may have been too small. God has something better planned for you. Are we there yet? Yes! Absolutely! That's what we celebrate when we celebrate Pentecost!

Amen.