

Pentecost Fright

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May 28, 2023

Lectionary: Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:25-35 John 7:37-39

Not too long ago in the events of the Gospel of John, Jesus had said to the woman at the well, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water (Jn 4:10); and Jesus said to her, “those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty” (Jn 4:14).

On this day of Pentecost, we have this same theme of living water connected to the Holy Spirit; but before we go in the Spirit’s direction it is wise to look closer at what is occurring in today’s scripture lessons.

Jesus is in the midst of the Feast of Tabernacles at which Israel gathers luxuriant branches and builds make shift shelters in which to live for the span of the festival. These acts were meant to remind them of the time spent wandering in the desert for 40 years. This was also a great celebration at the time of the agricultural harvest, in gratitude for God’s provision in difficult times. So, Jesus is celebrating the feast of Tabernacles, and it is within this context that Jesus invites the thirsty to drink . . . again, not in the way that the woman at the well had first imagined . . . and not in the way that you and I would naturally imagine today. When Jesus tells the crowds to drink, what he has in mind is living water.

This theme of living water, no doubt is a beautiful metaphor of how God nourishes creation through the incarnation, restoring desert like conditions with running water—even deeper, through a theological act of atoning for the sins of the world, the incarnation provides a blood infusion to those who would have perished otherwise. Living water is also blood. Jesus describes Himself as a person not limited by the material universe but completes the universe by being the supernatural nourishment characterized by how blood is living water that saves the world.

I know what you are thinking at this point—that this is a bit macabre, a sort of a horror movie being played in the Gospel of John. In some ways you are correct because at the beginning of chapter 7 in John, apparently, Jesus’ biological brothers (not disciples) sarcastically tell Jesus to go show Himself to the world, and do this at one of Israel’s biggest public events –the Feast of Tabernacles. Jesus’ brothers said this sarcastically, because John said not even Jesus’ brothers believed in him (John 7:5). So, Jesus’ invitation during this celebration was strange no doubt as Jesus said to the thirsty to come to Him to drink. The biblical reference is not strange per se since the Feast of Tabernacles is well known biblically (Zech 14:1–21 and Ezek 47:1–12) to describe a water libation service, in which water is brought up to the altar and poured over it. Keep in mind, Jesus foreshadows his gruesome death. Keep in mind living water is more than a metaphor, it is literally blood.

Also, keep in mind the psalm for today which describes another literal water full of monsters and fear:

26 Yonder is the great and wide sea
with its living things too many to number, *
creatures both small and great.
27 There move the ships,
and there is that Leviathan, *
which you have made for the sport of it.
28 All of them look to you *
to give them their food in due season.
29 You give it to them; they gather it; *
you open your hand, and they are filled with good things.
30 You hide your face, and they are terrified; *
you take away their breath,
and they die and return to their dust.
31 You send forth your Spirit, and they are created; *
and so you renew the face of the earth.

So, Jesus' context invites us into a strange world and if matters could not get any worse, they do—Jesus screams. John doesn't describe our Gospel lesson with the usual, "Jesus said or Jesus spoke", no, here the description is Jesus "cried out". And what did he cry out? It was this, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink." Where all of this becomes "Stranger Things" is in how Jesus is not referring to himself as he previously did with the woman at the well in their discussion of living water. This time Jesus is talking about the Holy Spirit. Jesus states, "As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" Now Jesus was not talking about himself but about the Holy Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

Today, with all of this context, we celebrate Pentecost because now we know the Holy Spirit's presence comingled with Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension. In knowing this, however, we often times find the Holy Ghost frightening—being with Jesus that whole time without our knowing it.

Ghosts frighten us. They are the top villain in horror movies. In our anxieties we see Ghosts distorting themselves and crawling on ceilings in disjointed human form like inverted insects. Scaring us by appearing out of nowhere. Ghosts appear as ancestors in pain and misery. Ghosts are like parrots and mimic your voice, luring you into scratching and weeping and gnashing of teeth. In short, when we think about ghosts we think about horror and evil.

But this is not the case at Pentecost. Pentecost, which literally means the number 50, particularly 50 days after Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Pentecost displays a good ghost, no not Casper, but the Holy Spirit. Who descends upon the scared to death apostles and disciples and

encourages them to begin the church. There are two key reasons why the Holy Ghost is different from horror movies.

Soothes instead of Frightens

John says we know the Holy Spirit when Jesus is glorified. Jesus, in his glory becomes a good Shepherd (not like his brothers thought, someone out of his mind). A good shepherd knows when we are frightened—our communal responses sharpen when listening for a predator-- the sheep are ready to run. Instead, our glorified Jesus (resurrected Jesus) knows our anxieties for the future, for now, and the accumulation of our anxieties from the past. Jesus knows that life can be so difficult and overwhelming that we lose the ability to pray and we need God to pray on our behalf. So, Jesus says to His huddled disciples, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now” (John 16:12).

We become like a little boy, frightened in the night. He screams, so his mother comes into his room to comfort him.

“It’s okay,” she says to her son, “God is with you.”

“Even in the dark?” the boy asks.”

“Yes,” his mom says.

The little boy's responds, “But Mommy, I want someone with skin on.”

Jesus says to the frightened disciples, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.”

"Put some skin on those words, Jesus," we, too, want to say. So, God does this with the incarnation. In our hearts we say, "Show me what the truth looks like in a world such as this. Be practical, Jesus, because if I follow you and your truth, I will lose my life." We do lose our life in baptism by gaining the resurrected life of Christ. This is why we are about to reaffirm our baptism vows.

I went looking for God with skin on in 1988. I was in seminary at Princeton, and I was given a grant to spend the summer in India. I spent half of the summer in Bombay (now known as Mumbai), working with the Christian Children’s Fund housed in a Christian social work agency in Dharavi, still the largest slum area in the world according to western sociologists and now made famous by the movie, *Slumdog Millionaire*.

The other half of the summer I went on pilgrimage to see God with skin on. For me that meant going to see Mother Teresa and the work she did. Feeding the *Harajan*, or children of God, washing the mucus and feces off the sick, and playing with a colicky infants . These were the ways she ministered to Christ's Body. I arrived in Calcutta by train, late in the day, exhausted. My exhaustion deepened as I saw human horses running through the streets carrying people from the upper caste.

I woke up the next morning at 5:00 am to go to matins, or morning prayer, and pray with Mother Teresa. Being in the presence of someone who had become like a rock star to me felt like a

dream. “What’s the most important thing in the spiritual life?” I asked her. She said, “To pray.” And she concluded, “Not just with words.” It was not quite the concrete answer that I wanted.

Mother Teresa came to the United States in 1990. She attended a meeting in Boston. Someone stood up at the end of her talk and asked,

“Mother, since there is a sharp decline in religious vocations, especially in women’s orders, can you tell me the secret of why the Order of the Missionaries of Charity continues to grow?”

Mother Teresa responded, “I give them Jesus.”

"But Mother, I wonder if you offer a certain technique, such as requiring the Sisters to always wear their habits, or . . .”

Mother Teresa interrupted, “I give them Jesus.”

“Yes Mother, we are all aware of your profound, work, but I’m asking about something different. . . something else.”

Mother Teresa responded, “I give them Jesus, there is nothing else.”

I told this story in the Church of the Holy Family, where I served once a priest in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. I got an email from a parishioner, praising me for the profound story, but she asked, “How do I give Jesus?”

Her question--the question we all want to ask--returns us to our fear. And the fear is this: “If we want to save our life, we must lose it. And if we lose our life for Jesus’ sake, we will find it.”

Jesus told us this. The strange thing is that Jesus wants us to receive the Holy Ghost but such reception requires a sort of death. This sort of death looks like baptism. When a priest performs a baptism, she prays that all who are baptized into the death of Jesus Christ may live in the power of His resurrection. Any kind of death is frightening, but Jesus informs us that the Holy Ghost is not here to frighten us but to soothe us into a new life, a new way begun by Jesus. Jesus puts it this way: “I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you”. The Holy Ghost is our advocate in scary times.

Holy Ghost Diversifies

The second reason the Holy Ghost is different from horror movies is because the Spirit demands that we look like God’s image. Not in the horror movie way of mimicry but in the way of being unity and diversity at the same time.

If we fail to understand this different Ghost, Pentecost is scary because the Holy Spirit is the one who makes us die and be born again. Again, not in the horror movie kind of way but in the way that a stranger no longer stays a stranger but is somehow transformed into a friend. The Holy Ghost is capable of taking a once hostile crowd and turn them into a community.

Shouldn't we long for this Holy Spirit among us? Whenever the Holy Spirit is around that which once seemed impossible is made possible. This is scary, however, in that this means openness to new possibilities—routines are now questioned and better habits are put in place. The Spirit of Truth comes to us. We now know what we should do, but find our own spirits struggling against the truth.

St. Luke, writing the book of Acts, captures the anxiety of people when the Spirit manifests. Luke captures this anxiety with a twist of humor, "All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." (Acts 2:12,13). We should celebrate the Spirit's creation of new possibilities and new community among us, but often the Spirit's diversification from crowd to community makes us feel overwhelmed.

The Holy Ghost lessens our anxiety by advocating for us. Similar to the first of January, the Holy Spirit brings new resolution. Although we should celebrate, it is difficult to want the new solution of moving from stranger to friend. The Holy Spirit holds up a mirror so that we can see the real horror—we are the ones more scary than ghosts. Our sins, greed, jealousy, abuse of power, etc are really more scary than human bodies crawling on a ceiling. The Holy Spirit shows us that we often lack the image of God capable of being unity and diversity at the same time. The Holy Ghost's mirror makes us realize our own responsibility in cooperating with God to produce God's intentions on earth. The Holy Ghosts advocates on our behalf and helps us make new resolutions. Now, I'll have to get up at 5:30 am and jog---even though I want that doughnut, I must eat that celery instead—even though I want to spend more money on myself, I'll give to the church. I often find it difficult to want the healthy fruit of the Spirit.

Our response to all of this is that we will need to practice celebrating the Holy Spirit. Like the early church in the book of Acts, we will have to practice celebrating a Ghost—welcoming those different from us and speaking new languages. After all, our comfort comes to us in our fear when there is practical response. The little boy's desire for someone with skin on is good theology.

The Holy Ghost helps us see that Jesus becomes incarnate for us so that we may be incarnate to God. We're pretty good at being the flesh and blood part of the incarnation, the part we need to work on is inhabiting the Holy Spirit. We do this when we become community—when we welcome the stranger, when we raise a baptized child, scared to death, in the identity of Jesus Christ. When we do this—the miracle of Pentecost lives among us.

So, don't be afraid 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. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.