

I.

In her book *Encountering God*, Diana Eck describes the way the church functioned in the Middle Ages. This period, from about the fifth century to the beginning of the eleventh century, was, in many ways incredibly bleak. Rome had been sacked and its empire had been destroyed. Food was scarce and people had to scrape to get by. And the one sort of bright spot in the middle of all this was the local cathedral, which, as one commentator has said, was like a church-sponsored public works project that gave thousands of people jobs. The cathedrals, which were built even in small towns became the cultural, social, and spiritual epicenter of life.

So it was, in these so-called Dark Ages, that some of the most beautiful murals, sculpture, and stained-glass windows were created, so that even in this time of illiteracy people could learn the stories of faith.

Pentecost was one of the great holidays celebrated in these cathedrals. And many of them were built with this great festival in mind. The great domed and vaulted ceilings that were so intricately painted and decorated hid a number of trap doors that were used specifically for Pentecost. During worship some of the worshipers would climb onto the roof. And at the appointed time they would release live doves through the trap doors, through the painted skies and clouds of the ceiling. These doves would come swooping down on the congregation as living symbols of the presence of the Holy Spirit. At the same moment choirboys would make whooshing and drumming sounds and then as the doves swooped and the drumbeats soared the trap doors would open again and rose petals would rain down on the worshipers like tongues of flame.

The holes through which the doves swooped and the petals fell were called “Holy Spirit holes.” In the midst of a hard existence of working hand-to-mouth, you can only imagine that

this sort of extravagant beauty seemed almost like a miracle. A reminder that when God comes into the church something surprising, beautiful, and wonderfully unexpected almost always happens.¹

II

After Jesus ascended into heaven, about 120 men and women, his followers, gathered together in one place. They had been instructed to stay in Jerusalem until they were clothed with a power from on high. So stay put they did... in an upper room, the door closed and the shutters drawn. After a while, things began to get stuffy and the group got restless. “Let’s call a business meeting,” they said to themselves. For though there was no church yet in those days, the disciples knew the importance of a good business meeting. After all, they had to replace Judas... whose term as a disciple had, for lack of a better word, expired. And yet even after they had voted and installed Matthias, thanks to the hard work of the nominating committee, the disciples felt paralyzed. What was their purpose? What next? Who were they, now that Jesus was gone? Followers without a leader. Disciples without a teacher. A congregation without a church.

So, they waited some more, behind locked doors and drawn shutters. Unsure who to be, where to go, or what to do. Around them, thousands of faithful people from across the Jewish diaspora made their way into the city to celebrate the Festival of Shavuot—a celebration that took place fifty days after Passover, celebrating the ways that God drew them together as a covenant community at Sinai.

¹ Eck, Diana L. *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*. Boston: Beacon Press, (2003). p., 130.

From the windows of their room the disciples could hear those pilgrims speaking in all sorts of languages, the languages of their homes from across the Greco-Roman world, as they came to bring the first fruits of their harvest to return to God as offerings. The disciples also listened from behind their locked doors as the Temple priests celebrated the giving of the law to Moses at Mount Sinai, the familiar words of Scripture resonating in their hearts and in their bones.

Every once in a while, in the evening, someone was caught tapping their foot or swaying to the music in the streets in the evening. But they didn't move. They didn't talk to anyone else. They didn't even open the door. It felt safer just to stay put.

III.

But just when those gathered disciples were reaching the point of boredom, deciding things were just going to be like this forever, God came to them. Rushing into the walls of their upper room, knocking the shutters off the windows, and the hinges off the door like the gust of a mighty wind. Flames danced above their heads like tongues of flame and with eyes wide and knees knocking, the disciples began to speak.

Scripture tells us that as they spoke, it was as if the walls of their room melted away. All of a sudden people began to gather from all over, drawn by the sound of their native tongues. Thousands of them began to flock together to listen to what these fiery preachers had to say. And each of them could understand the sermons perfectly, though they each came from different lands and spoke different languages. We don't know what the disciples said. The Bible doesn't give us any specifics. But they spoke about the wonders of God, proclaiming the good news in a

way that each person could hear and understand. And as the crowd gathered, they wondered aloud, “What could this mean?”

Standing up, Peter moved between the flames as if pushed by another gust of wind, and made his way between the crowd and the disciples. “Let me explain,” he said. These people who are speaking to you are not filled with spirits, but with God’s Spirit! And it is this spirit that is drawing us together, even in the midst of all our diversity. “God’s Spirit has come to all of us!” Peter said. “The young and the old. The women and the men. The powerful and the oppressed. In every language of the world, God’s Spirit is speaking. And here we are, from different places and from different lives, speaking different languages, but drawn together by this Spirit that will not let us stay the way we are.”

III.

Before the day was over, the church had grown from 120 to over 3,000. And it wasn’t because Peter’s sermon was the best anyone had ever heard. It wasn’t because the disciples had come up with the best marketing campaign. It was because when they opened their mouths, they sounded like Jesus. When they greeted people from all over, they welcomed them like Jesus. When children cried, they invited them into their laps. Like Jesus. When the sick came near them, they held their hands. Like Jesus.

They had begun doing things they never thought they would be able to do—things they had only seen Jesus do in the past. But, as Barbara Brown Taylor says, “They had sucked in God’s own breath and they had been transformed by it. The Holy Spirit had entered into them...and it was time for God to be born again—not in one body this time but in a body of believers who would receive the breath of life from their Lord and pass it on, using their own

bodies to distribute the gift.”² They had been transformed, in all their differences, in all their diversity, into the body of Christ.

V.

For me, that is the miracle of Pentecost. That God would come to people as flawed and scared and uninspiring as the disciples and breathe into them new life and new inspiration and new hope. That God would knock down the doors and walls of fear and invade their space so thoroughly that they had no choice but to move out into the world to speak about the wonders of Jesus. To share the good news. Only God could look at the people huddled in that room and believe that they could change the world.

And I believe that on Pentecost, the question for us is always: Do we still believe in a God who acts like that? Do we still believe that God looks at us and sees people he can work with?

I do. I believe that God still comes to us today. I believe that God does not always wait politely for us to check our calendars when he invites us to do something new. I believe that God sometimes just crashes right in and melts the walls off of where we are huddled. I believe that God breathes new life into us even when we are afraid. I believe that God delights in our differences and loves transforming “they’s” into “we’s.” I believe that God created the church on that first Pentecost and that God continues to create and recreate and inspire and breathe new life into the Church even now.

² Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Home By Another Way*. Cowley Publications; First edition, 2nd printing (January 25, 1997). p., 145.

So that in this church God creates, every language is spoken. In this church God creates, every human is loved. In this church God creates, everyone is valued and given a seat at the table.

This Spirit-led church has been created, not to gather behind locked doors or all in one place. But to go out into the world to continue what God has been about from the very beginning. To do the things that Jesus did. To unleash the wonder and beauty that we have experienced in this place. So that, as we go, our very lives might become like trapdoors through which the Holy Spirit enters the world, surprising us, amazing us, and transforming us all.

AMEN.

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