



Grace Church

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Rector

THE HOLY SPIRIT OF TRUTH IS LIKE RAIN THAT NEVER STOPS POURING DOWN

Sermon for Pentecost, May 24, 2015

Readings: Acts 2:1-21; Psalm; Romans 8; John

Sermon text: “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.” John 16

God did not just create the world and let it go, like a clock that was wound up and is ticking along. God did not just come once, in the person of Jesus Christ, Son of God, and we now have to wait until God alone knows when for the day he comes again. No. God is continually creating and continually coming among us—and this is what Pentecost is all about, the rain of the Holy Spirit and the ongoing transformation of the world into the kingdom of God.

Pentecost is a major feast, the equivalent of Christmas and Easter. But somehow the church has forgotten that. It is as if we prefer to *remember* Jesus to *becoming* like him, through being filled with his Spirit, the Spirit of God.

Pentecost is when the disciples were changed from frightened victims of history to courageous makers of history.

Pentecost is when the Spirit of God descended like a tornado and a fire—but instead of destroying those it touched, the Spirit filled them, inspired them, gave them tongues they didn’t know they had, to teach, and powers they didn’t know they had, to heal, and courage they didn’t know they had, to witness to Christ the Lord. Go and baptize the nations, Jesus had told them—and now they began to do just that, from Jerusalem to Samaria to all the world. The fire spread.

But perhaps the fire has burned out. Perhaps the evangelical and Pentecostal zeal that has in various times in history swept through the world—through Europe and the Middle East, through the Americas, and more recently, and even now, through Africa and China—inevitably burns out or may even be replaced by another form of faith, as happened in the middle East with the rise of Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries. Perhaps like the first and second Great Awakenings of American history, the holy rollers whip up enthusiasm and passion that cannot sustain itself in the long haul. People calm down, order is restored.

Religion gets established—and the gospel is tamed. People accept a nice moral therapeutic deism, encouragement to be better people and assurance that they too are beloved of God and deserve a place in heaven. The churches become a sort of social club, a kind of social service agency, a provider of religious services like marriages and funerals, a place that preserves old music and stained glass architecture—and people like that. It's comfortable, familiar, and safe.

But we do not worship a safe God.

Annie Dillard famously wrote, “Why do people in church seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? ... 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.”

Good. I hope “the waking god draws us out to where we can never return”—for we will be where God has called us to be. For two thousand years the forms have changed so that the Spirit can renew the church. And that is surely what is happening today. For one thing, what is “safe” and familiar is no longer sustainable. Last week a major survey reported yet again on the decline of mainline Protestant church attendance and membership. It is no comfort that we were not alone—the Roman Catholic Church has also been in steep decline. The conservative evangelical churches are treading water. And around the world the Pentecostal churches are growing fast.

Why is that? I suppose there are many reasons. But I know there is one reason for why some churches of all sorts are growing. And that is when there is a sense of spiritual vitality—an expectation that God is present and powerfully at work, that the people who come to church will sense that presence and power and be filled with—you got it—the Holy

Spirit. This expectation speaks to the longing among so many people to experience God, come to know God—not just know about God.

I came as your priest in September and now it is nearly June—a program year. I have found many faithful and spiritually vital people in this congregation—which is what I remember from my days as a member. I recognize and rejoice in the energy for mission and social transformation that animates our outreach programs. I am amazed at the dedication and energy of our core volunteers. I am encouraged by signs of growth as new and diverse people join our community. I thank God that Grace is already a healthy and spiritually vital church—but we cannot rest where we are. As Bob Dylan sang long ago, “those not busy being born are busy dying.”

God is always on the move—the Spirit is always blowing in the wind, and there is no telling where or when amazing things will happen next. Grace happens—all the time. The Spirit continues to fall like rain on all flesh—though some put up umbrellas and stay dry. But you don’t have to stay dry. Come into the rain. Turn your face to the sky. Open your mouth and drink in, open your eyes and see the hand of God at work in the world.

¹ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 40-41

