

Pentecost Sunday May 31, 2020
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Silence and Prophecy
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

God declares that I will pour out my spirit on all people, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy. Acts 2:17

There is a very old folk tale called *Three Ravens*; it has been around so long it has many variations and versions. It is a story about a young woman who was silent for three years, three months, three weeks, and three days in order to save her three brothers who had been turned into ravens by an evil witch. The witch was married to the children's father, and she was jealous of his affections for his four children, so she attempted to cast a spell on them, turning them into ravens. But she succeeded only with the three boys, as their sister escaped the enchantment by running away. It is said she ran for three days and nights. Her brothers – who were ravens- found her and told her the only way they could be returned to human form was if she refrained from speaking for three years, three months, three weeks, and three days and if made them shirts spun from aster flowers. She dearly loved her brothers, and the young woman swore an oath to do exactly as they said in order to restore them to human form.

Immediately she set to work gathering aster flowers and making shirts for her brothers without speaking a word. Eventually she was discovered by the king of the land who was instantly smitten by her beauty and took her with him to his palace and married her. But the king's mother did not approve of the marriage. She was highly suspicious of a young woman who couldn't speak, and believed this woman was not worthy to be the queen of the kingdom. So, the king's mother set out to torment the young woman. It wasn't long before the young woman gave birth to a baby. The king's mother secretly took the baby and left a pile of moldy old leaves in its place. When it was discovered the baby was missing, the king's mother accused the young woman of being a witch who should be burned at the stake for killing her baby. Of course, the king didn't believe that.

The king and the young woman had two more babies, and both were secretly kidnapped by the king's mother, who left a pile of dead and rotting leaves in their place. Finally, the king was convinced by his mother that his lovely, silent bride should be burnt at the stake for the death of their children.

Through it all, the young woman suffered terribly. She suffered the loss of her babies, and she suffered the silence she had to keep which meant she could not defend herself, not even when she was sentenced to death. There is a point in the story where her grief and loss and suffering become unbearable, so she ran to a secluded place late at night and dug a deep, deep hole. Then she put her head deep inside the hole and cried and sobbed and let out all her pent-up sorrow and grief.

Don't worry, the story has a happy ending. Coincidentally the three years, three months, three weeks, and three days ended just as the young woman was being led to her execution, and her brothers the ravens arrived at that moment. She had finished their aster flower shirts and was able to throw the shirts over her brothers who were instantly transformed back into young men and she was able to break her silence. She and her husband the king were reunited with their children -who were still alive- and the king's mother got what was coming to her.

But the part of that story that has lingered with me over the years is the part where the brave young woman couldn't bear the burden of her silence any longer. She had lived through a lot, but every joyful event and every tragic loss was made worse by her inability to speak. This silence created an even deeper pain inside her that she finally had to find a way to express or she felt she would die and then save no one. Since she had no other way, she dug a hole in the ground and filled it with her sobs. It's a good cautionary tale about the harm forced or imposed silence can cause.

This might seem like an inappropriate story to share today, on the Sunday we celebrate Pentecost, the gift of the Holy Spirit. Whether we remember it through the Gospel According to John where the risen Jesus stood suddenly among his disciples as they sat behind locked doors and breathed on them the Holy Spirit, life-giving breath of God or we remember the exciting story in Acts of the Apostles when the followers of Jesus were together in the upper room and there was a mighty rush of wind and tongues of fire and suddenly Jesus' followers just couldn't stay put anymore and ran into the crowded streets of Jerusalem suddenly able to speak languages they didn't know telling everyone of God's goodness and love, today is one of the major feast days and celebrations in the church.

When we are together for worship, it is often a custom to celebrate this day by having the Gospel read in as many different languages as possible. Some of you may have good memories of such Pentecost Sundays, and it can be a fun

way of trying to re-create the powerful events of the day. But the problem with that kind of practice is it can miss the point of what happened in Jerusalem that day. What we end up hearing in such church services is usually a cacophony of incomprehensible noise instead of the Gospel. That is not what the people in Jerusalem heard that day. They heard the good news in words they could understand. They felt noticed, and that is what was powerful.

Today isn't a day of noise, it is a day when the followers of Jesus heard the call of God through the Holy Spirit and then shared what they heard, not as an incomprehensible scream into a hole in the ground, but with words that outsiders could understand, words that gave hope and invitation to a hurting world. That is what we celebrate today.

However, considering the events of this past week, many of us might not feel like celebrating. We aren't together in person yet, even though some other churches are. And that might create some sour feelings. This week the total number of people who died from COVID-19 reached 100,000, making this virus, as writer Mitch Albom observed in an article in USA Today, one of the fastest killers in US history. It is even more heartbreaking for those of us painfully aware that the majority of those deaths are in the African American and Native American communities. There was another senseless murder of an African American man by someone whose job is to protect not destroy life, this time in Minneapolis and this has been another source of deep pain that has sparked outrage. I completely understand if you don't feel like celebrating.

All these causes for sorrow could help us notice that perhaps our past celebrations of Pentecost, despite the glorious music, the carefully scripted lingual choreography, the stirring sermons, missed the heart and soul of the day. Maybe it is only where we are right now, sheltering in place, getting bored with on-line worship options, missing our old routines and ways of being together, sitting in our socially distant isolation with broken hearts that the Spirit of this Holy Spirit day can touch us even more deeply and touch reality more deeply than before. Maybe it can even touch those places inside ourselves that we have been keeping silent for a long, long time. Those places that we know about, but don't talk about. Except maybe when we angry post on Facebook. There are times social media feels – at least to me – like that hole the young woman sobbed into. But while it might feel good to release pent-up sorrow or anger to the cacophony of outrage on social media, it doesn't necessarily go very far or change much of anything.

In the Holy Spirit's care, those places might begin to not only heal, but find the encouragement needed to empower us to do the hard work the world needs us modern followers of Jesus to do right now. The day described in the book of Acts was the day a movement began, now that movement is our hands, in our hearts, our souls. A movement to help bring heaven and earth closer together, to work with God to build a world where loving God and loving our neighbors aren't just words we say but the way everything from education to government to religion to business to health care is based on.

It can be overwhelming work. And we are right to ask: where does it begin? Perhaps a good place to begin is with the prophesy of Joel mentioned in the book of Acts in today's readings: in those days God will send God's Spirit on all people and all people will prophesy. Too often we fail to understand what prophesy really means. We mistake it for future telling. But prophesy is a tradition that goes back to the Old Testament, our Jewish siblings' Bible. Prophets were not seers of the future. They were men and women who listened to God and spoke what they heard and their message was always the same: they warned people they were not living God's way, they were not loving God and their neighbors and any society that does not live by loving God and loving our neighbors is going to fall and fail. If you read the Old Testament much, you'd see the prophets were correct.

And when their world fell down around them, the prophets had more words of support, love and help. Through poetry like the psalms prophets helped people name their reality, the things they had lost, the ways systems had been unjust, the pain they felt for what they had lost. The prophets helped them grieve those changes. Those who listened to the prophets, who were able to grieve, then found there was new life on the other side of expressing their grief, and that was where they found hope.

Today there are prophets among us who are calling us to do the very same thing. They are asking us not to stay silent, but to name and grieve our losses and our sorrows. The leaders of the Episcopal Church, including our Presiding Bishop, other denominational and religious leaders, and civic leaders in our country are calling for tomorrow, Monday, June 1 to be a national day of mourning and lament. It is a day when churches are asked to ring bells at noon, flags are to be flown at half mast, and other public forms of displaying grief are to be observed. The intention of the day is to name our grief by lamenting the pain and sorrow we

feel. Church of the Good Shepherd is participating in the day by offering a brief prayer service at 12:15 tomorrow via Zoom. You can find the link to join that service in the Sunday church email and I hope you do join me.

We hope this will be a start for letting ourselves give voice to, name and work through the sorrow and grief we may be feeling personally and on behalf of a hurting world so that we can begin listening to the Holy Spirit and follow where it calls us. As author, theologian, and former Bishop of Durham N.T. Wright has written in his new book *God and the Pandemic*: "Out of lament of God's people, new possibilities can and do emerge." It is possible that we don't have to rush to return to normal, because COVID-19 is showing us our normal was a way of life deeply flawed with inequality. It exposes we have not been loving God and our neighbors. We can name and grieve this, because that is the first step to realizing and living into new possibilities.

This is not a time to let the silence press in on us. As theologian and professor emeritus of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary Walter Brueggemann has written in his book *Reality, Grief, Hope, Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks*, unexpressed sorrow can manifest in violence. This is a time to listen to the prophets among us and accept the invitation to face difficult truths and lament, for that is how we move into hope we can share with the world. Please join me for the zoom prayer service tomorrow, I am longing to see you and begin this, our new work and ministry together.