

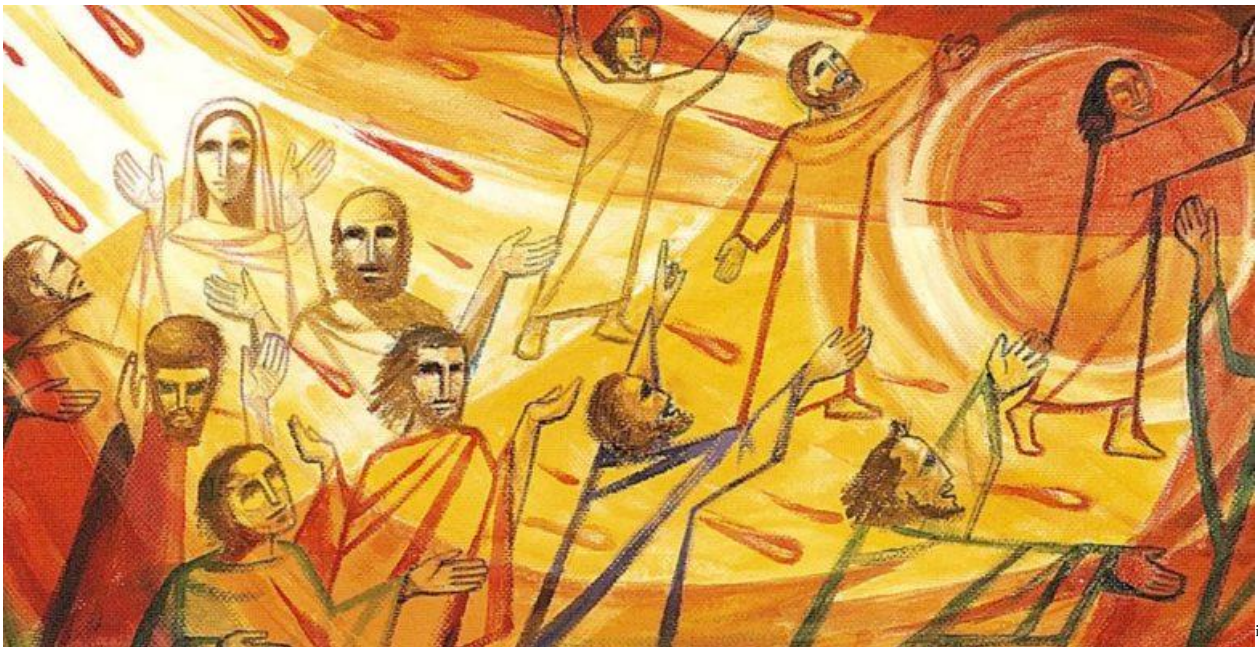


SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE DAY OF PENTECOST, YEAR B, MAY 23, 2021

ACTS 2:1-21; PSALM 104: 25-25, 37; ROMANS 8:22-27; JOHN 15:26-27, 16:4B-15

WE HAVE TO BE WILLING TO BEGIN AGAIN



Acts 2:1-21 [When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs-- in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions,

and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'"]

I recently read an essay by acclaimed author Kathleen Norris in which she reflects on the challenges she has experienced as a writer, and how those mirror and inform the journey of faith, and life itself. Her essay is one in series inviting leaders, authors, theologians and others to address the topic: “How my mind has changed” against the backdrop of these turbulent and uncertain times. Kathleen Norris entitled her essay, “We Have To Be Willing To Begin Again.”ⁱⁱ

It seems to me that this Feast of Pentecost is an invitation to consider these prompts in our own right: How has my mind changed, and we have to be willing to begin again. Surely we can see those threads of reflective purpose weaving together the lives of those who were in Jerusalem fifty days after Jesus’ resurrection. The Spirit causes quite a stir, and it moves the disciples through a spiritual experience that changes everything really.

Up to this point, it appears that the disciples were mostly sitting on their hands, unsure how to proceed without Jesus, but then the conversion comes, and they are willing to begin again. I seriously doubt it all made perfect sense in the moment, but they had the courage to step out into the light of that late spring day and speak into the crowds drawn close by the spirit’s

unfettered dance. That is the true gift of Pentecost—the gathering of community.

True, the Spirit serves as the catalyst—always has, always will, if we pay attention and open ourselves to the conversion moment—but the true miracle that day was the forming of community across the arbitrary divisions of tribal and ethnic distinctions designed to separate. That didn’t mean they ceased being Parthians or Elamites or Cappadocians. It did mean that God pours out the spirit upon all flesh, for a purpose, and that has a unifying and healing effect upon all people. That’s not uniquely Christian, and we risk thwarting the Spirit if we claim to be sole inheritors of the gift. Which is why I am suggesting that the miracle of Pentecost is community.ⁱⁱⁱ

It’s important to situate this Pentecost tradition in context with the older Feast of Weeks, or Shavuot, a Jewish holiday marking seven weeks after Passover. It is occasion to remember the giving of Torah at Mt. Sinai, in the desert, having fled Egypt, unsure of how they would survive, and then God forges the relationship with the people who are willing to begin again. It did not all make perfect sense in the moment, but they pressed on, as the people of God, and that changed everything.

Shavuot is tied to the winter wheat harvest in late spring, and is occasion to present one's first fruits from the harvest as an offering to God. People were encouraged to gather for the festival of joyous revelry, and share from their abundance. The echoes of that tradition reverberate into this space even today, as we are invited to bring our offerings of life and labor and present them to God as first fruits also.

Shavuot is also a call to rededicate oneself to the work of justice. The law explicitly directed the family not to harvest their wheat to the edge of the field nor to gather every head of grain, but leave the gleanings for the poor, the widow, the immigrant, so that none would go hungry. The book of Ruth is read on the feast as a beautiful way of rediscovering the Spirit's stirrings even as Ruth and Naomi are willing to begin again, and set aside tribal affiliations for some holy purpose. If you've not read the story recently, I'd encourage you to consider it. It has problematic elements, to be sure, but isn't that true of every story with humans interacting?

Human interaction. Community. How we do this matters. We have to be willing to begin again.

Rami Elhanan and Bassam Aramin have been on my heart all week as Israel and Palestine have been warring. They've spoken here at Saint Mark's, and they spoke to our pilgrimage group in Jerusalem in 2016. Rami is an Israeli whose daughter was killed by a Palestinian suicide bomber in a restaurant in 1997; Bassam is a

Palestinian whose 10-year-old daughter was shot in the back of the head by an Israeli police officer. Each has sufficient warrant to incline toward hate for the other, but they have chosen instead to serve as co-directors of Parents Circle, a non-profit in which parents who have lost children in the bitter Mideast conflict choose peace instead of war; choose community instead of division; choose love instead of hate. Rami and Bassam were willing to begin again.

It need not be so remarkable though. Last weekend Kathy and I were on a plane to visit our daughter whom we had not seen since 2019 except on two-dimensional zoom screens. Despite being masked and vaccinated, I found myself hyper-aware of the humanity surrounding me on the plane—more people sitting close to me than I have had in nearly a year and a half. I was struck by my discomfort, even though I can make rational sense of airplane ventilation, vaccine protection, and universal masking.

I was second-guessing our decision to fly, unsure if I was willing to begin "this" again, even in a small way, but then we were treated to conversations with our seat mates—a young woman going to meet her mother who had moved since she last saw her. And a 19-year-old college student coming to Seattle to spend a summer interning at an airline to gather experience for his long-held dream of becoming an airline pilot. His generosity of spirit and joyful grace were palpable gifts to us, offering enough

for me to glean in the moment and know it to be holy.

Maybe that is just a quaint story of my own poverty of spirit, but sooner or later, everyone of us must be willing to begin again. Maybe you already have, maybe you are waiting still. That's okay. And only you can know what that will look like. The point is look for the Spirit's movement as you step into your moment, and let its catalyzing beauty light on you, and change you, and see the hand of God at work in your life in new and exciting ways. And claim community as the miraculous gift being presented to you.

In a few moments we will renew our baptismal covenant, as community, and rededicate

ourselves to the work of faith, this life in Christ, and to live into our baptismal vocation of justice and peace, respecting the dignity of every human being. Make your commitments anew, as you say, *I will, with God's help*, trusting that you are God's beloved, and as beloved community, we will make our way together, even if we cannot make perfect sense of it all in the moment.

And then let the spray of holy water light on your skin, a sign that the Spirit dances in our midst even now.

And for that may God's holy name be praised. Amen.

ⁱ <https://buildfaith.org/planning-for-pentecost/>

ⁱⁱ https://www.christiancentury.org/article/how-my-mind-has-changed/we-have-be-willing-begin-again?utm_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm_campaign=5e454cea92-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2021_04_27_02_55&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_b00cd618da-5e454cea92-82678819

ⁱⁱⁱ A notion presented elsewhere by Keri L. Day, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/we-need-pentecost?code=L3KOKeb9JyWm29hbO2Vj>



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