



May 31, 2020
The Feast of Pentecost
and 175th Anniversary of the Founding of Christ Church in the City of Detroit
The Rev. Emily Williams Guffey, Rector
Acts 2:1-21

This past Monday, George Floyd, a 46-year-old African-American man, gasped, “I can’t breathe” while a white police officer crushed his neck. Fires of protest were kindled in Minneapolis, and continue to rage throughout the country in protest of his death and, moreover, in protest of the intolerable inequities that people of color experience; the infection of racism that is in the air that we all breathe, and always has been in our country and in our city.

On the evening of March 14, 1968, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., told a group gathered at Grosse Pointe High School (now Grosse Pointe South High School) that “these conditions are the things that cause individuals to feel that they have no other alternative than to engage in violent rebellions to get attention. And I must say tonight,” he continued, “that a riot is the language of the unheard.

“And what is it that America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the plight of [black people] has worsened.”¹ [And today we might add that the COVID-19 crisis is being borne disproportionately on their shoulders, and in their families]. King continued, “It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it is failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice and humanity.”

Pentecost was, and is, a Jewish festival,² one of three on which all Jews were required to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem from wherever they may have been, whether Parthia, Cappadocia, Mesopotamia, Libya, or Rome. It was, and is, a festival of the first fruits of the harvest. On the Day of Pentecost that followed Jesus’ death--a death by asphyxiation at the hands of a state more concerned about the status quo than about justice--his disciples were utterly astonished by a violent wind that rushed into the house where they were.

It was not a soothing breeze, the kind that makes you think, “Ah, everything’s going to be okay.” No, this was a fierce, howling, startling gust, the kind that upends everything, that makes a total mess, that sharpens you from complacency, that sweeps away normal.

¹ From the speech “The Other America”, accessed via the Grosse Pointe Historical Society: <http://www.gphistorical.org/mlk/mlkspeech/index.htm>

² In Hebrew, *Shavuot*. See more at <https://www.ifcj.org/learn/jewish-holidays/shavuot/what-is-shavuot-pentecost/>

Although this Pentecost we are away, poignantly, from our exuberant pageantry and our glorious church building even on the 175th anniversary of our congregation's founding--and although it sounds like pure luxury to our ears that the disciples in Acts got to be gathered together in one place--our observance of Pentecost today might be more like the first one than many others since. For life, as we have known it, so abruptly has blown upside down and all around, and who is to say what's next?

We, like the first disciples, are acquainted with grief. We, too, have lost beloved ones to insidious infections in the air that we together breathe: infections of COVID-19, infections of racism. We, too, try desperately to protect those we love, and we know daily that the struggle feels so intractable. We, too, see fire alighting.

There are two kinds of fire, and the Holy Spirit, as discomfiting as it is, shows us the difference. There is the fire of senseless, pointless destruction, which we do see today, and there is the fire of faith; there is the fire that burns for justice. It is this fire, we might say, that creates a beacon of hope.³

This fire, like the burning bush, transforms but does not consume.

This fire unifies even as it burnishes.

This fire creates a before and an after.

This fire emblazons upon us a new normal.

This fire inspires those who witness it to stick together, to become one.

This fire sears away any sense of, or even lingering desire for, division.

This fire kindles courage.

This fire changes you, and you won't be the same, nor will you even want to be.

This fire has changed us before, and it will change us again.

On that Day of Pentecost, when some in the crowd who were hearing the disciples' newly vulnerable and connective words, they wanted to dismiss the phenomenon. But Peter (Peter of all people!) stands up and speaks the language of the unheard. He knows what it feels like. (This Peter, remember, was the same man who, after his best friend and mentor Jesus was arrested at the hands of the state, denied three times that he even knew him!⁴)

It is this fire that changes Peter and transforms him into a man who cannot help but stand up--as if upon water⁵--and say, "Listen! This is God at hand, who is pouring and will pour the Spirit upon all of us! Yes, we may see blood and fire and smoky mist; we might even say the moon itself is turning to blood. Yet, also, our young are seeing visions, and our elders are dreaming dreams."

We live today at, and through, Christ Church Detroit, in the dreams of our elders. We live today in dreams that far surpass what our elders could have dreamed! Equally, we live today in the visions of the young. We live today and every day in the Holy Spirit—and let us not forget it.

³ The mission of Christ Church is to be a diverse, inclusive community, which, through its lively worship of Jesus Christ and witness in His name, serves the Christ in all person and shines as a *beacon of hope* throughout the heart of Detroit.

⁴ Matthew 26:69-75

⁵ Matthew 14:22-33

We are today uncomfortable, deeply uncomfortable, yet we are not comfort-less, for oh, how the Holy Spirit is with us. I see it alighting upon you.

Let us remember that our founders, too, have seen this flame. They have felt quite a similar torrent of feelings. 175 years ago, almost exactly to the day, three members of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, which then was the only Episcopal parish in Detroit, summoned the bishop with an urgency as if of fire. "There needs to be," they implored, "a second Episcopal congregation in the city. How about," they suggested, "by the river?" The bishop agreed, and thus there became a before, in which Christ Church Detroit did not exist, and an after in which we now find ourselves.

From nearly that very same day, there has been in this congregation a near incessant pursuit and constant evolution and a deep trust of the values that exist at our molten core:

- the value of reaching out beyond ourselves, constantly;
- the value of extending warm and full hospitality--hospitality that continues in different languages;
- the value of worshipping God and praying to the fullest.

We dare to speak. It is our legacy. We dare to speak, to learn, and to trust, for the languages of the unheard are our very own, and we are nothing without them.

These values, these instincts, these urgencies sound remarkably like what the first Christian community in Jerusalem found themselves doing after the Holy Spirit had visited them, when they were gathered from all around the known world and people were finding them every day, and they found themselves speaking and listening in languages they didn't even know they could understand, but they couldn't help but to continue—and to continue and to continue—in the teaching, in the fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers.⁶

Today and every day, come, Holy Spirit, come.

⁶ Acts 2:42-47