



The Spirit Came from Heaven

SCRIPTURE:
Acts 2:1-13

May 23, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

This is the church's day: Pentecost. The day that God made it clear that God wants there to be a church in this world that God loves. God wants there to be a people who trust that even in hard times, the love of God is alive. God wants there to be a people who find in life a love that gives courage—a love that even surprises. On Pentecost the Spirit of God chooses to come from heaven into this world and it's a strange world.

It's a strange in-between time we are in, isn't it? Over a year ago, when few, if any, of us knew anyone directly affected by the pandemic, we shut things down, quarantined in our homes, cut ourselves off from friends, flattening the curve. Some folks started losing their jobs, and for the first time in a long time, the nightly news began covering stories of people lining up at food pantries because the paychecks had stopped and the only thing lower than their bank accounts was their self-esteem.

Then George Floyd couldn't breathe, and communities of color who seldom breathe easily, flooded the streets. Many from our church family joined them, as a mixture of deep weariness but also fragile hope filled the air.

And then we engaged in a public debate around masks. Is freedom primarily about my rights to be whoever I want to be and live however I want to live, or does freedom require a submission to responsibilities, including responsibility to my neighbor?

It has been an exhausting year... and at times we might have wondered how much we could handle. But here we are today in our holy space. Here we are in this place where we come to be with God. And I don't know how you are feeling. Good, I hope. Joyful, I hope. Blessed, I hope. But incomplete, too.

It is an in-between time, isn't it? We are not where we have been, but we are not where we want to be.

Of course, as people of faith, we are always living in in-between times—a time touched by the harshness of the world, but a time in which we live toward God's promised day.

So, I think it is nothing less than providential that we gather and remember Pentecost, this day when God makes it clear she wants there to be a church in this world. She wants there to be a people who see the world with the same love that God sees in the world—a love that gives courage in the face of difficulty and a love that even surprises.

Pentecost is a strange story... the spirit coming down from heaven like a rushing wind. Tongues of fire? What is that? Disciples who speak with Galilean accents immediately learning whatever the language is for speaking to Parthians and Medes? And most notably, they find courage. Somehow they shook off the fear that kept them behind locked doors and they moved into the world with boldness. It's a strange story, but it is an echo of another story that we love.

If I understand the text, in Pentecost we hear an echo of Christmas. At Christmas, the love of God comes down from heaven and chooses to live where we live, to live in this beautiful but broken world. When Jesus was born, Caesar occupied Bethlehem. Life was hard. And into the harshness a little boy was born who would breathe the love of God into the world—a love that gave his followers courage and even surprised them.

So again, on Pentecost, the spirit of God, the love of God came down from heaven. The disciples lived in a world that was harsh. Crucifixion was common and there was much to fear. But that holy love gave them courage. It changed them. It empowered them to see their neighbors with new eyes and to speak to them in a way they could understand, and in a place defined by fear, community was born. It happened because God lived there.

I think God chooses to live here. Perhaps the clearest thing we know about God is God comes down to us. God comes to us and meets us in the hard places. Rachel Held Evans said it this way: God stoops. “From walking with Adam and Eve through the garden of Eden, to traveling with the liberated Hebrew slaves in a pillar of cloud and fire, to slipping into flesh and eating, laughing, suffering, healing, weeping, and dying among us..., the God of scripture stoops and stoops and stoops.”¹ I think she is right about that.

So, on this church’s day, we remember that this is our story. And the world needs us because life is still harsh. There has been a lot of grief since we gathered in these pews last. A lot of grief for a lot of reasons. Jobs have been lost. Children have been stressed and some are falling behind in school. Violence has erupted. And so many have died, and have died alone. So, we need to remember that God stoops down to be with us and that the love of God can give us courage and can even surprise us.

My friend, Sam, is the younger of two brothers. Their dad was a pastor. There is a stereotype about preachers’ kids. We have that stereotype in large part because of Sam. Sam’s older brother was in Sam’s words, “Mr. goody, goody two shoes.” He was always polite. He learned all the words to the songs in Vacation Bible School. He was always the preacher for Youth Sunday. He was a great kid; everyone said so.

Sam, on the other hand, was obnoxious. Sam would skip Sunday school. He would disrupt the silent prayer with a burp. The only reason he wasn’t excommunicated was because his father was the pastor. But in the midst of causing all that trouble, something else happened. Those patient, kind Presbyterians loved Sam into faith. They loved him in a way that surprised him, and in time, he felt called to ministry.

Time passed and Sam returned to his home church to preach one Sunday. He is an extraordinary preacher. Sam says, after the service, he spoke with Mr. Brown. Mr. Brown had been in the church in the years that

Sam and his older brother were children there and he was old back then. Sam was a bit surprised he was still alive. Mr. Brown looked at Sam and said, “I want you to know that I always knew you would amount to something. I just knew you would turn out. Even when others around here had their doubts, I was confident in you. I knew you would make it.”

Sam remembered how Mr. Brown had been his confirmation teacher. How patient he had been with him. He said, “I don’t know what to say, Mr. Brown. Thank you.”

Then Mr. Brown said, “By the way, whatever happened to that no good, pain-in-the-neck, younger brother of yours?”

“Well,” said Sam, “you’d be surprised.”

The truth is the church, at its best, is that community where we love the best out of us. Even when we don’t know it, love is a power. No one becomes their best self without someone to love us into that place. That’s why God wants the world to have a church; to have a people who remember that God stoops—and that a courageous and surprising love lives here.

I’ll remind you of my friend Bishara Awad. He lived in Bethlehem, a place that is still occupied. I stood with him in that village—caged-in with cement walls that are 25 feet high—cutting the birthplace of Christ off from the rest of the world. Bishara’s movements have been curtailed and monitored all of his life. Family members have been killed by violence.

But Bishara was a man of surprising love. We stood and looked at that wall and I asked him, “Do you find it hard to maintain hope? He said, “Tom, God raised Jesus from the dead twenty minutes from here. The disciples were filled with the Spirit a half hour from here. That happened in this world. It is impossible to lose hope.”

That’s our story in these in-between days. God stoops to breathe a holy love into us and into this world, a love that gives us courage. That is our story this day and every day. Carry it with you.

1 Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water and Loving the Bible Again* (2018), p. 11-12.