

A different kind of Pentecost

(Based on John 20: 19-23)

When I think of Pentecost, I usually think of that reading from Acts in chapter 2.

The one with all the elements of a great drama: the disciples gathered together, the sound of a rushing wind and flames appearing to hover above them. The cacophony of different languages being uttered by these men, huge crowds pressing in to see and hear what's going on, and then Peter using ancient Scripture to interpret what's happening: the Holy Spirit has finally come upon the followers of Jesus.

But there's another reading, often overlooked, that seems more in keeping with our present circumstances. We find it in today's Gospel reading from John 20.

It begins in fear. In an intimate setting. The disciples, those who are left, are in a locked room. They are still absorbing Jesus's painful death, their own actions and inaction around that, and now some stories of his resurrection. Whatever else they may be feeling or thinking, surely they are confused and hurting.

And then suddenly, their beloved teacher and friend is there with them. And his first words to them are these:

Peace be with you.

Peace past the locked door. Peace past their own disappointment, self-concern, deep loss, other swirling feelings and thoughts. Peace in the midst of chaos and great change. And unexpected life where there should be death.

Jesus points out his own wounds and they begin to realize he is really there with them.

Peace be with you, he says again.

Peace to quiet the fear. Peace to settle and focus. Peace to still down and discern order out of chaos.

It sounds like something Jesus might say today to us, his followers. Peace be with you. In your fear. In your loss. In your disturbed sense of what really matters.

Peace be with you. In your intimate bubbles. In your family life, in your friendships, in the church gathering in different ways now. In those candles lit on windowsills as you pray in the night or early morning.

They found that they were not abandoned in that locked room. Neither are we. Christ in our midst.

And then in the story, Jesus gives them work to do. And it's to carry on what he was doing. Despite how they have messed up, He says, "As my Father has sent me, I am sending you."

They are to be the Good News for others. To tell the stories of God's great love for the world, and how to treat one another, and how to live fully the life given.

There's a way forward for them, and it has to do with being part of Bringing the kingdom into being. Through their actions and words and who they are.

These days, there is a deeper reflection going on in the world in our semi-isolation. There's a new awareness of those who have less, those who are vulnerable, those who play essential roles in our common life like teachers and farmers and medical people, and truck drivers and store clerks and funeral directors and....
a new awareness of our impact on nature, as we watch it heal in our absence.

Will this awareness be short-term or will it reshape the world after the pandemic is finally over? What have we learned in this time of fear and isolation, and how will it affect how we move forward?

It is a time of possibility and of dreaming new dreams. That we have not seen before in our lifetimes.

It's a time of shifting priorities: family coming into sharper focus, work and skills reimagined, responsibility towards others more recognized. (So many people tell me stories of others checking on them, picking up groceries and prescriptions, sending them letters or emails or parcels, dropping off baked goods, making sure their apartment buildings are clean and safe.)

In that locked room, the Holy Spirit comes upon those gathered, not with great dramatic flair but quietly, intimately. Jesus simply breathes upon them and says: Receive the Holy Spirit.

No speaking of tongues here, evidence of something huge happening immediately. No. Simply a breathing upon. Jesus's breath reaching out to mingle with theirs.

And one last directive, perhaps to help with their peace and energy. A few words about the responsibility of forgiving. Something that often gets overlooked in our work as Jesus's followers.

It's a small story tucked into the second last chapter of John. Nowhere near the drama of the story in Acts.

And yet...if we imagine ourselves in that locked down room, one voice and person meets us in our fear and chaos, speaks peace to our hearts as we absorb his presence, gives us direction, and places such confidence in us.

One last image, on this the church's birthday. A visiting bishop was speaking to synod decades ago. He mentioned that when the candles are snuffed out at the end of a worship service and the smoke drifts upwards, he always thinks of us being God's wish for the world.

