

*God of wind and fire, breathe your life into us and invigorate us with the spark of your Spirit. Amen.*

When I started writing this Sunday's sermon, the US Embassy in Jerusalem had just opened. In opposition to the official UN proposal to give Jerusalem international status, and in contrast to nearly every other country, which maintain embassies in Tel Aviv, the US chose to recognize Jerusalem as the capital city of the state of Israel, and move our embassy there.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Status\\_of\\_Jerusalem](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Status_of_Jerusalem); [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_diplomatic\\_missions\\_in\\_Israel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_diplomatic_missions_in_Israel)

The new embassy opened the day before the 70<sup>th</sup> Nakba, the day when Palestinians remember their homes from which they were forcibly removed during the Arab-Israeli war of 1948 and 49. Palestinians hold annual demonstrations claiming their right of return, as supported by a UN resolution from that same year.

The UN resolved that, "refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property..."

<https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/0/C758572B78D1CD0085256BCF0077E51A>

In 70 years, none of that has happened. So Palestinians protested the relocation of the US embassy this week, and they persisted in their demonstrations for their right to return to their homeland. Some of them tried to attack Israeli forces. As always, however, the bigger guns won, and over 60 Palestinians were killed and thousands were wounded.

This is the backdrop for our hearing of the Pentecost story today.

The Holy Spirit shows up in Jerusalem.

And that means something very different today than it did in the book of Acts.

Jerusalem has been a center of worship for thousands of years. In New Testament times, even though the city was occupied by the Roman empire, there was freedom of travel to and from Jerusalem. We know this because of the way in which the story is told – one of the most difficult readings of the year for lectors!

There were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. When they heard the disciples speaking in the native language of each, they asked, "If all these speaking are Galileans, how do we each hear 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 of God's power!"

(Acts 2:5-11, edited)

If freedom of worship and freedom of movement was good enough for the Holy Spirit, then why aren't they good enough for us?

Why do we continue to support oppressive forces that seek to build walls between people rather than bridges? Why do we seek to limit the movement of God's Spirit? On this Pentecost Sunday, I wonder – since we know we can't control God, why do we try so hard to control where the people of God are allowed to worship and live?

God's spirit came to the people in Jerusalem – a much freer Jerusalem than the one that exists today.

I wonder – if a second Pentecost were to occur, would the Spirit strike in the same place twice? Or would the Spirit seek out a more open, welcoming, and life-giving place?

Then there's the matter of who actually received the Spirit.

We hear in Scripture that the Holy Spirit shows up in the wind and fire.

No one can escape the wind. The breath of God filled every pair of lungs in Jerusalem that day.

Tongues of fire appeared on the heads of the eleven disciples and the one they voted in to replace Judas, and on Mary the mother of Jesus, and Jesus' siblings, and on certain other women disciples who were with them in that place. Acts 1:15 tells us that the believers numbered about 120 altogether.

The Spirit inspired women and men.

Perhaps you have heard that our partner denomination, the United Methodist Church, is struggling with issues of gender right now. A few weeks ago, a resolution for gender equality was voted on by the leaders of the church... and it failed.

The denomination could not pass an official statement saying that women were equal to men.

<https://www.christianpost.com/news/united-methodist-church-rejects-constitutional-amendment-saying-god-isnt-male-or-female-223767/>

How can that even happen in a church that traces its roots to Pentecost? If all genders were good enough for the Holy Spirit, then why not for us?

Looking outside the church, why does sexism persist in our society? The ELCA's draft social statement on women and justice states that sexism is so prevalent in our society that none of us can escape its effects.

How can we let such a society exist without questioning it at every turn?

Remember – women and men, sons and daughters, were all good enough for the Holy Spirit. Then why not for us?

On Pentecost, the Spirit of God was poured out on all people, slave and free.

A slave is a person who has no freedom of action, no right to property, and limited human rights. A slave works in harsh conditions for low pay, and is under the domination of another person or force.

<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/slave?s=t>

By these definitions, our prison industrial complex is a system of slavery.

The United States has less than 5% of the world's population, but over 20% of the world's prisoners.

<https://www.aclu.org/prison-crisis>

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2015/04/30/does-the-united-states-really-have-five-percent-of-worlds-population-and-one-quarter-of-the-worlds-prisoners/?utm\\_term=.6ecceb763379](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2015/04/30/does-the-united-states-really-have-five-percent-of-worlds-population-and-one-quarter-of-the-worlds-prisoners/?utm_term=.6ecceb763379)

Those prisoners are given jobs like sewing military uniforms or panties, working call center desks, or building bunk beds.

<https://nypost.com/2015/06/23/the-seven-weirdest-jobs-that-prisoners-do/>

People incarcerated in the United States don't get paid minimum wage. Companies use prison labor because it's cheap.

In this country, for all intents and purposes, our prisoners are slaves.

And once someone has been convicted of a felony, we make it almost impossible for them to get a job on the outside, or a place to live. We make it easy for them to get re-arrested for an offense like missing the bus that was supposed to take them to meet with their parole officer. And we often take away their right to vote to change the laws that make their lives so restrictive.

How can we do such things and also take the Pentecost story seriously?

If God gave preaching authority to both slave and free – prisoner and not – then why can't we do the same? If any social status was good enough for the Spirit, then why not for us?

The Holy Spirit came to young and old.

At the 2016 Churchwide Assembly of the ELCA, which both Pastor Stephen and I attended, there was a passionate plea by one of the younger voting members.

We were given a lot of freebies at the assembly. The water bottle that I'm using in worship today and a travel mug you've probably seen me use before, the bag I'm using to carry my knitting around lately, the t-shirt I gave to Pastor Stephen when his and Susan's luggage failed to arrive.

During the assembly, we heard reports on the ministries of the church. There is some amazing work being done by the ELCA in places around the world. But they all need more funding. After one particularly moving presentation, a young man went up to the microphone and asked why we were spending so much money on ourselves if people needed wells and clean water around the world. His line was, "Less water bottles. More water."

I am eager to see if the upcoming Churchwide Assembly in 2019 takes his request to heart and spends less money on attendees so that our church can have more money for mission.

The Spirit of God speaks through people of all ages.

In the wake of yet another school shooting, this time claiming 10 lives of teens and teachers in Texas, the news clips are predictable.

<https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/18/us/texas-school-shooting-victims/index.html>

Young people are calling for help reforming our gun control laws in order to make their schools safe.

Older politicians are calling for thoughts and prayers, but no changes to gun laws. Somehow, our society has chosen to give authority to one voice, but to disregard the other.

This is not the way of the Holy Spirit.

If both young and old were good enough for God's Spirit, then why not for us?

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus tells the disciples:

"When the Spirit comes, she will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment:

about sin, because those who claim to be faithful do not believe in me;

about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer;

about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned."

(John 16:8-11, edited)

The Pentecost story proves Jesus' words true.

We have not been prepared for the movement of the Holy Spirit.

We have been proved wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment.

Our society is not prepared to embrace the voices of both women and men, prisoners and free people, young and old, and everyone in between.

Thankfully, God gives us another chance.

Despite years or centuries spent denying or ignoring the movement of God's Spirit in our world, the Spirit continues to inspire us. So we get another opportunity to hear God's Word from unexpected places.

When I sat down to finish this sermon, the internet was abuzz about the royal wedding that happened yesterday morning.

There was the usual talk about hats and dresses and who was invited or not, as well as people wondering why they should care at all, since we literally fought a war for the right to ignore the British royal family.

There was also quite a lot of commentary on the sermon delivered by Presiding Bishop Michael Curry of the Episcopal Church.

If you haven't heard the sermon that Bishop Curry preached for the wedding yesterday, I highly recommend that you look it up! You can find it on the church Facebook page, or on countless online news sources.

Bishop Curry preached to a global congregation about unselfish, sacrificial, redemptive love.

This is the love that the Holy Spirit embodied in Jerusalem two thousand years ago, through wind and fire. It is the love that we are called to embody today, with the inspiration of the Spirit.

This love changes lives – and it can change this world.

Bishop Curry tells us,

“When love is the way, then no child will go to bed hungry in this world ever again. When love is the way, we will make justice roll down like a mighty stream, and righteousness like an ever-flowing brook.

When love is the way, poverty will become history.

When love is the way, the earth will be a sanctuary.

When love is the way, we will lay down our swords and shields, down by the riverside, to study war no more.

When love is the way, there's plenty good room – plenty good room – for all of God's children.”

<https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2018/05/19/bishop-michael-curry-full-remarks-royal-wedding.cnn/video/playlists/royal-wedding-prince-harry-meghan-markle/>

And if you'll allow me to make Bishop Curry's words a bit more Pentecost-specific:

When love is the way, we will be able to recognize the breath and the fire of God in all of God's children – young and old, rich and poor, male and female, free and imprisoned, powerful and powerless – and everyone in between.

When love is the way, then the breath of God that inspired the believers on that first Pentecost just might have a chance of sharing God's love with the whole world.

The book of Acts tells us – in a slightly updated version:

When the day of Pentecost had come, the believers were all together in one place, about 120 of them. 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. At the sound of wind and fire, the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. There were worshippers from Afghanistan and Turkmenistan, Iran and Iraq, Israel and many parts of Turkey, including near Istanbul and Ankara; from Egypt and northern Libya, and both Jews and converts to the faith visiting from Rome; people from the island of Crete and from Saudi Arabia. Yet in their own languages everyone heard them speaking about God's deeds of power!

Then Peter, standing with the believers, raised his voice and addressed them, "People of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, Listen! 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!  
Your young people shall see visions,  
and your old people shall dream dreams.  
Even upon prisoners, both men and women,  
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;  
and they shall prophesy.  
Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.' "

May God help us see the presence of the Spirit, moving among us as it moved on that first Pentecost.

And God give us the grace to hear the Word from unexpected places.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

***Other sources used in this sermon:***

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/how-to-tell-when-criticism-of-israel-is-actually-anti-semitism/2018/05/17/cb58bf10-59eb-11e8-b656-a5f8c2a9295d\\_story.html?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.aad9a881ecf2](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/how-to-tell-when-criticism-of-israel-is-actually-anti-semitism/2018/05/17/cb58bf10-59eb-11e8-b656-a5f8c2a9295d_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.aad9a881ecf2)

<http://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/7931>

<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2018/05/palestinians-great-march-return-human-cost-180516110538165.html>