

The Day of Pentecost: Whitsunday

May 28, 2023

The Church of Saint Mary the Virgin, Times Square

by the Reverend James Ross Smith

Propers: Acts 2:1–13; Psalm 104:25–32; 1 Corinthians 12:4–13; John 14:8–17

The ancient hymn, “Veni, Creator Spiritus”—“Come Holy Spirit”—is sung at Vespers, on the Day of Pentecost, at the Dedication of a Church, during the Sacrament of Confirmation, at Ordinations, and whenever the Holy Spirit is invoked. One translation of the hymn’s first verse goes like this, “Come, Holy Spirit, Creator blest, and in our souls take up Thy rest; come with Thy grace and heavenly aid to fill the hearts which Thou hast made.” This is the Holy Spirit, Third Person of the Holy Trinity, the Spirit of God, Lord and giver of life, who created that which did not exist, who brings every blessing and is the giver of every grace. This is the Holy Spirit, God active in the world, source of gifts that make a difference: wisdom, understanding, courage, comfort, and this great Sacrament, which we have come to celebrate this morning. This is the Holy Spirit who gives us the strength to do what the Spirit asks of us. This is God’s Spirit, who fills our hearts when we grow weak and weary, when all meaning drains away, when our hearts feel empty, when small things overwhelm us and we whisper to ourselves, “Is this all there is?”

This is the Holy Spirit, breath of God, transforming wind, fire of life.

“This American Life” is a public -radio program that’s been around for almost thirty years. The show is hard to describe, so I’ll let its producers do it for me, “Each week we choose a theme and put together different kinds of stories on that theme. Mostly we do journalism . . . that’s built around plot. In other words, stories! Our favorite sorts of stories have compelling people at the center of them . . . [They’re] like little movies for radio.” What that description hints at, but doesn’t quite say, is that the show is interested in human nature. It’s a show that wants to see us clearly in all of our mad complexity. The show is compelling because it looks at us and

finds human beings beautiful, but also sad, inscrutable, eccentric, inspiring, appalling, and often very funny.

Back in April, the show aired its 796th episode. Its title was “What Lies Beneath: Summoning up stuff that’s usually hidden down deep.” The first act of the episode also has a title: “Music of the Night after Night after Night”: a story about the orchestra of the musical *Phantom of the Opera*, which opened in 1988 in a theater not far from here and played in that same theater for 35 years, closing, finally, just a month ago, after 13,981 performances.

The question posed by the episode is this: how do we cope with repetition, routine, and boredom? It pushes the question hard by looking at the members of that orchestra. For instance, some of the musicians joined the orchestra right out of music school but were in their fifties when they played their final performance. This is routine on *steroids*—what does it mean to sit in the exact same chair, next to the same person, and play the *exact* same notes, every day, year after year? The answers that the musicians give are understandable: you make the best of it, after all it’s a good job that pays well and offers security and great benefits. You can buy a house and send your kids to college with a job like that. But still there is all that deadening sameness. Sometimes “security” actually means “getting stuck,” and that is risky. When that happens the heart grows empty, and meaning drains away.

And so, in a way the episode is about what happens when things don’t work out the way you expect, when you don’t become a star or get the promotion, when the story of your life is not the story you had written in your head, when your dissatisfaction tempts you to take it out on those around you. This is the hidden-down-deep anxiety that forces us to ask, “Why am I here?” “Where do I belong?” “What am I meant to do?”

The answers that the episode gives are earthbound answers that look inside the human heart but are reluctant to look beyond it: the answers go like this, you do the best you can; you try not to behave badly, but sometimes you do; you try to connect, but it's hard; you crack jokes; you gab and gossip; you complain; you develop weird habits; you grow irritated and sometimes you get angry; you retreat; you hide behind the same routines; and every once in a while you leave, because sometimes that seems to be the best and only solution.

And I understand those answers. I recognize them in myself. But I also know that they are not *Pentecost* solutions. The show, despite its secular wisdom, does not have the vocabulary that would allow it to say, "Come, Holy Spirit, help us in this time of need, give us the fire of hope; help us to act, to decide, and to choose; and fill our empty hearts with the meaning that only you can give."

And so in our own time of need we turn to other solutions and other words, we turn to Scripture and our Tradition:

- 1.) First, the theologians tell us that the Spirit is not *us*. The Spirit always comes from outside of us. In the gospel this morning Jesus says that the Spirit, "will dwell *with* you and will be *in you*." The Spirit is not our mood, our whims, or our restless search for meaning. The Spirit *is* meaning.
- 2.) Second, the Spirit is not always ethereal. In Scripture, the Spirit is an active power that comes to us; it appears, hovers, rushes, comes mightily *upon*, rests upon, gives utterance to, overshadows, descends, inspires, and enters.
- 3.) One theologian (Anthony Thiselton, *A Shorter Guide to the Holy Spirit: Bible, Doctrine, Experience*) says this: the Spirit "is the source of life, creation, and creativity." And we see this in our readings this morning. The vivid passage from Acts describes the advent of the Spirit. Here the Holy Spirit is both physical *and* spiritual. The

Spirit is wind and fire as well as reconciling grace. One young Brooklyn vicar puts it this way, “The Feast of Pentecost is important because it is the beginning of the reversal of Babel...The ‘dividing wall of hostility’ between people of every race and nation was torn down...The...Holy Spirit *opened our closed lips*” (Ben DeHart, St. John’s, Park Slope, Instagram).

- 4.) Another writer tells us that one “characteristic of the Spirit of God is the empowerment of the individual, especially for leadership, but specifically for the benefit of the community.” This is of course Saint Paul’s message. One of the Spirit’s projects is to create community, but the Spirit does this by using each person’s unique gifts. This is one of life’s great mysteries: God “searches [us] out and knows [each one of us] . . . he discerns our [very] thoughts from afar,” but he doesn’t stop there; armed with this knowledge he takes each one of us, lifts us up, and knits us bit by bit into the very Body of Christ.

Human beings keep learning that just because we can’t see a thing, doesn’t mean that the thing doesn’t exist. We couldn’t see microbes, but they are most definitely there. In our world, dependably solid objects are made up of atoms and molecules that dance in constant motion, though we cannot see it and can scarcely believe it. I think the Holy Spirit is like that: present, active, combating despair, urging hope, eager to inspire us despite our resistance. The Lord asks us, “My human children, mortal and fallible, can these bones live?” (Ezekiel 37). And sometimes we don’t know how to answer because we are afraid, and so sometimes we have sufficient humility to respond, “Lord, *thou* knowest.” But sometimes we have eyes to see and ears to hear. We can see it when God breathes his Spirit onto dry bones and into empty hearts, and then we see the gift: there is life and, once again, it is holy, and it is good, very, very good.