

GRACE TO YOU AND PEACE FROM GOD AND FROM OUR RISEN SAVIOR, JESUS THE CHRIST, WHO POURS HIS SPIRIT OUT ON US AND CALLS US TO LIFE TODAY. AMEN.

A few Pentecosts ago at a Lutheran church in Ashburn, we celebrated the first communions of three young African American men.

It was a joy to see Raymon, Ryan and Kyan's yearning toward this experience of God's gift of life coming toward them. It was a day of dreams and visions as they approached this first taste of salvation: Jesus' crucified and risen body becoming the fuel of their own cells, their first taste of the enlivening wine making our veins pulse with Jesus' own blood.

In his Pentecost faith testimony, Raymon shared that he wanted to protect Jesus and be a loyal disciple with his whole life. Kyan proclaimed thanksgiving to God for that life, and the world. Ryan's testimony was to the way God had uplifted his people, and given them confidence in themselves.

These young men were ready and eager to take their part and place in the great circle that the Spirit's work in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sin, the resurrection of the body, makes very real for the world, and for its future.

Afterward I asked them about their experience and Raymon burst out:

Jesus came to me like fire in the belly!

How does our experience of Jesus' Pentecost stir you, enliven you, kindle fire in your belly as we enter this story and make some noise together this year, the fire of life calling to each of us, but also calling to us as a community into a new day and new reality.

I've puzzled for years about just what drives the power of the sermon Peter gives next. A sermon that at the very moment when what they were experiencing could have just been laughed off as wine in the belly, instead birthed what would become the Christian church.

It must have been powerful the way the Gettysburg Address changed the course of a country. The way Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech mobilized action for justice.

The sermon Peter preaches, using scripture we heard from Joel about God's day of transformation, segues into the Psalms that foretell suffering, and God's sending of a just king and exalted savior that will never abandon us to despair and will raise us to hope.

Peter tells the story we've summarized here as "a sermon about Jesus, crucified by sin and evil and raised by God to life" in a compelling, life-changing way for his first hearers. By the end of it we hear that they are cut to the heart, and motivated to ask what it is they can do to enter this life, too.

And at that, God suddenly drenches 3,000 of them with power of the Holy Spirit, whereupon they start living a life that dwells in the word, contributes possessions for the common good of all, opens homes and celebrates with glad hearts the meal of Jesus' life to fuel them with joy! Awe comes on everyone because of the amazing things God does with them! It's so attractive that day by day more come on board, and together they share the wholeness God desires for us and for all the world.

But I've never tackled Peter's sermon myself. Because I couldn't get it.

My commentary reading and seminary training has always reminded me this was a sermon for the initially Jewish community that became the church where I was the Gentile outsider, and also that

passages like this have been used to promote anti-Semitism among Christians. I could never make the contemporary leap.

Peter's galvanizing point, was that God had promised life! God had promised a coming reign of justice! God had promised that restoration and a transformed closeness to the heart of God was on its way!

But Peter, who had also betrayed Jesus and run away at his arrest, looks earnestly at his fellow people of God, and tells them that this reign **had** come in Jesus of Nazareth and... what happened? You crucified Jesus, Peter goes so far as to tell them, you handed him over to the religious authorities for a state sanctioned execution everyone was complicit in and everyone washed their hands of.

And I have never been able to see what being asked to gaze on this crucified Jesus would do for us -- until this year.

This year, I hear this message with a heart broken by the incalculable loss of life and livelihood in this pandemic. I find myself moved by the spirit-filled, creative and life giving ways people have risen up, to care for others, to support businesses known to them, and to preserve life. To make noise, as someone said in our bible study this week, in so many ways, including opening the windows and banging on pots, or cooking meals to give thanks for medical care workers.

This year, my heart is cracked open by painful realizations of ways years of systemic injustice and oppression and economic inequities have disproportionately exposed Latino and African American community members to the worst of both the economic devastation, and as essential workers, to the death, of covid 19.

And I am asking, what then shall we do?

This week, I am cut to the heart to have to witness the breath of life extinguished in George Floyd, and to say the names of Brianna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery, and so many other African American children of God who have gone before them. Convicting me as a person possessing white privilege of the many everyday activities that are risk-free for me, but routinely put the lives of my African American siblings in jeopardy.

I am asking, what then shall I do?

When not the fires of justice that Jesus came to ignite, but the fires of *injustice*, are burning? And when the first African American Bishop in this synod, my fellow Resurrection member, rouses me by posting on my facebook page that crying out with him isn't enough, that I need to go get my cousins and do something!

What next step will I take to confront the systemic racism with which I too am infected in a death-dealing way? What next step will Immanuel Lutheran Church take, to be explicitly anti-racist, make noise, and partner in that movement to turn to God and live?

I am moved by former President Barack Obama's words of challenge and hope:

"It's natural, he said, "to wish for life 'to just get back to normal' as a pandemic and economic crisis upend everything around us. But we have to remember that for millions of Americans, being treated differently on account of race is tragically, painfully, maddeningly 'normal' - whether it's while dealing with the health care system, or interacting with the criminal justice system, or jogging down the street, or just watching birds in a park.

This shouldn't be 'normal' in 2020 in America. It can't be 'normal.' If we want our children to grow up in a nation that lives up to its highest ideals, we can and must be better."

"It will fall mainly," he notes, "on the officials of Minnesota to ensure that the circumstances surrounding George Floyd's death are investigated thoroughly and that justice is ultimately done.

But it falls on all of us, regardless of our race or station - including the majority of men and women in law enforcement who take pride in doing their tough job the right way, every day - to work together to create a 'new normal' in which the legacy of bigotry and unequal treatment no longer infects our institutions or our hearts."¹

At this later stage in life, I get now how being cut to the heart and being confronted by the face of the crucified Jesus in a call to repent sin and evil brought life to those first hearers, inspired them and birthed the church in the wake of tumultuous and devastating events. I get what Raymon, Kyan and Ryan tried to teach me. We respond because the story doesn't end there. It's because God acts and sends us power for transformation that puts fire in our bellies.

God raised and exalted Jesus to life so that we might live. God still desires life for the world, and today, calls us into God's Pentecost project of dreaming and visioning a *transformed* post-covid normal. The Spirit unleashes us, super-spreaders of a message of life there for us when cut open hearts are filled with God's Spirit.

In a weird Greek grammatical turn, the same one that can be translated in John's story of Jesus' birth that "we have beheld FOR OURSELVES God's glory in Jesus," Peter's sermon will invite us to change our lives. Turn to God and we will "receive FOR OURSELVES" the gift of the Spirit of grace, and mercy, and truth, and life. Not grabbing it for ourselves, but in our active and reflexive yearning and prayer and in God's mercy for us, together with all people and languages receiving this gift of incalculable life.

We have this amazing joy today! In an affirmation of baptism that re-drenches us with cleansing, renewing, life giving waters, we receive the Spirit's grace to turn to God and live, power to spit in the eye of sin and evil and renounce all that would turn us away from the life God intends. A chance to rekindle joy in the Word and in life together, recommit to serving others with Jesus' Spirit, and work with our neighbors for true justice, and peace, in this world God loves.

We experience today the blessing of Jesus' life-giving body and blood, given and shed for us for the forgiveness of sins.

We too come away from this 50th day of Easter with Jesus' own fire in our belly.

So then, Peter concluded:

God has raised this Jesus, crucified, to life, and we are all witnesses of it. Exalted at the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit, and has poured out what you now see and hear.

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Immanuel Lutheran Church of Evanston
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¹ Barack Obama, *My statement on the death of George Floyd*
<https://twitter.com/BarackObama/status/1266400635429310466>