
Jesus says, "Peace be with you."

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A sermon by the Rev. Buddy Crawford Pentecost - John 20:19-23

While I was a student at Emory's Candler School of Theology I served as the seminarian at the Church of the Good Shepherd in Covington, Georgia. On one rainy, cold Sunday morning in my first year I was driving over for services. As I approached the Moreland Avenue exit on I-20, my car hydroplaned at a dip in the road, spinning out of control across four lanes of highway, and crashing into the outside concrete wall. I can still hear the awful sounds of crunching metal, breaking glass, and popping airbags, and the car seemed to sigh as it came to rest perpendicular to the interstate. I was pretty shaken up, but not seriously injured.

Once free of my seatbelt, I forced the door open and stood in the rain looking at my damaged car. I called 911 for assistance and then the church to let them know about the accident as I waited for the police. Although it was seven o'clock in the morning several people stopped to offer their assistance. While calling a friend to pick me up, another car stopped and three young men asked if I needed help, but I waived them on.

A few moments later one of the young men approached me from the opposite side of the car, pointing a gun at me. As he tried to force me to get into the car, I began yelling into my phone, describing what was happening, and slowly backing away from him. My assailant must have seen the lights from the police cruiser coming down the road, because he turned and ran back to his car and he and his accomplices drove away. I tried to make out the license plate, but was too shaken up to get the full number.

It was a surreal experience that left me with many mixed emotions. I felt angry and confused and fearful. In the trauma of the moment I wondered if true peace could exist in a world of aggression and violence and the complete disregard for a fellow human being in need. But the most troubling thoughts came in the doubts I had about my call to a vocation that seeks to speak peace in trying circumstances.

When it was evening on the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked due to fear, Jesus came among them and said, "Peace be with you." And he breathed on them, saying "Receive the Holy Spirit."

The differences between the Pentecostal experiences portrayed in the Book of Acts and the Gospel of John are striking to say the least. In Acts, fifty days have passed when God is boldly present in a larger than life encounter with the followers of Jesus. There are rushing winds, tongues of fire, and an outpouring of the Spirit that compels the disciples to go into the streets, joyfully proclaiming Jesus crucified and risen. And all who stop and listen are astonished as they hear the good news in a myriad of languages. It is an extraordinary and chaotic scene where the crowds in Jerusalem are offered new and renewed life.

In contrast, John's account has no strange winds or flames of fire; there is no cacophony of voices or joy in the absence of Jesus. Gathered in a house on Easter night, behind bolted doors, we find the disciples in fear and isolation. In this subdued scene Jesus appears and speaks, one solitary voice offering words of hope and challenge and promise. The stories in Acts

and John are not contradictory accounts, but reveal to us how God meets the Christian community where and when and how we need God the most.

After my incident on I-20 I contacted my supervising priest who I trusted and confided in him the anger and fear and doubt I was feeling. He listened and offered words of assurance and hope, telling me that I would need time to process my experience. For several weeks I contemplated "what-if" scenarios; what if I had been injured in the crash, or shot by the man with the gun, or had lost my life. It was like being on an emotional roller coaster, with anger and fear rising and falling.

As I struggled to work through these thoughts and feelings, I was amazed at the love and support I received from the parishioners of Good Shepherd and my seminary community. What I needed to hear were words of peace and comfort and that is what I received. When I was depressed, they offered encouragement; when I needed to explore the topic of justice, they listened; when I needed a hug or a pat on the back, they were present. My communities of faith prayed for me, and becoming the object of their prayers and love allowed me to breathe in new life, gradually moving me out of the place of fear and doubt where I had hidden myself.

Although in baptism we are given the gift of the Holy Spirit, living into an Easter faith is not always easy. While at times we may experience God in rushing winds and tongues of fire that send us into the world as confident and bold evangelists, I imagine that most of us live out our faith somewhere along the continuum between the fervor of Acts and the uneasy, fearful questioning of John.

And yet, John's is a hopeful account of how God meets us in the place where we need God the most. It may be after we have been in an accident...or when we or a loved one has been diagnosed with an illness. It may be in the tension of a troubled and strained relationship with our spouse or partner or friend. Or in the uncertain times following the loss of a job, when our financial security is threatened. God may speak a word as we face the death of someone we love, when the grief is palpable and we don't know how to endure the loss. In the midst of life's challenges and disappointments, when confusion and lack of faith overwhelm us, Jesus may breathe into us his abiding presence.

In John's story, Jesus comforts his followers by offering them words of peace, but his peace is not something that they are to keep to themselves. In an act that is reminiscent of God in the creation stories, Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into his fearful followers giving them renewed life. In the barricaded room Jesus constitutes and commissions the Church to begin a Spirit-breathed mission to offer the new and renewed life that the risen One promises to the world.

It is into this continuing Spirit-filled community that the parents and god-parents bring the candidates for Holy Baptism this morning. Through the sacrament they are born again by water and the Spirit, breathing in the new life promised by Jesus.

In just a few moments we will offer prayers for:

Rawson Marshall, Anna Thayer, Everett McCaleb, George Hardin, Katharine Clements, Olivia Helen, Mary Kathleen, Elizabeth Steele, Matthew Bradley, Elizabeth Lauren, Wyatt Emerson, Lillie Stewart, Charlotte Elizabeth, and Caroline Harris

in preparation for them to receive the sacrament of new birth. For all intents and purposes we pray that they will experience their own Pentecost, just as the disciples did in the locked room. We ask for them to have hearts open to God's grace, so that they will be filled with God's life-giving Spirit. We ask that they learn how to love others as they participate in the life of the church.

And as they grow in the knowledge and love of the Lord, we pray that they will take their places with us, bearing God's love and speaking words of peace to the church and to the world.

Taken together, our readings from John and Acts remind us that the gifts of peace and the Holy Spirit are given to a community. In this liturgy we have the opportunity to ask God to breathe the Spirit into our lives once again. As a community infused with the Spirit we may have the courage to incarnate God's promise of peace, just as the Candler and

Good Shepherd communities did for me , offering hope to one another, even when life's challenges would have us believe that peace is not possible. Amen.

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