

Pentecost: 5/23/21
The Reverend Dee Anne Dodd
St. Paul's, Wallingford CT

We don't know if they were wearing red that first Pentecost.
I suspect that red might've been one of the more rare and expensive dyes
back then, as was purple.
But here's what we do know from that story in Acts:
It was disruptive. They did things they'd never done before.
They engaged with people different than themselves.
They didn't know what the future held.
They were "amazed" but also "perplexed".
Of course there were naysayers who "sneered" and
said it couldn't be done, that they were drunk and delusional.
And the first Christians tried to make sense of it all, asking "What does it mean?"

The coming of the Holy Spirit is conveyed in a quieter story in John's Gospel.
It's the night Jesus is betrayed and he's spending his last few moments with the disciples
preparing them for what is to come.
He assures them that he's sending an Advocate,
the Spirit of truth coming from the Father.
Jesus says that he's telling them this now because they're entering a new phase.
And that Spirit of truth is going to "guide" them forward.

Two passages with very different tone and details but the same message:
*When the Spirit shows up she shakes things up –
and we'll never be quite the same.*

Look what a head-snapping series of Pentecosts we've had these past years.
Last year we were on Zoom, with me standing in front of a red background
leading the service from my dining room.
The year before that? I'm guessing we were in a full church
celebrating a couple of baptisms, singing our hearts out.
Because that's the only way we knew how to celebrate Pentecost back then.

And this year, glorious in its own way – outside, online, and
celebrating the Eucharist for the first time in fourteen months.

God only knows what next Pentecost will bring.
I'd be thrilled if it involved holding babies and singing our hearts out.
But that doesn't mean I think we can just party like it's 2019.

Because it won't be. We won't be exactly who we were back then.
And this world where God has called us to serve isn't the same.

A lot of this may be new to us, but it's not new to God,
who created the heavens and the earth out of a formless void.
It's not new to Jesus in whom God did a very new thing, and
through whom God continues to bring new creation.
And it's not new to the Spirit sent to guide us into newness of life.

That's the life we're baptized into, and which we reaffirm
in the Baptismal Covenant each week during Easter.
As we'll pray in a few minutes just before the asperging:
"We thank you, Father, for the water of baptism.
In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection.
Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit."

Death, resurrection, rebirth.
We can see the truth of this just by looking around this lawn
(and our own backyards) week by week.
I've said it before and here I go again: God did NOT cause this pandemic.
But God is with us, working through it, bringing life out of death.
God redeems all things. Even this. Even us.

We've seen a lot of death this year.
Over a half a million of our fellow citizens dead from COVID19,
still continuing at a nightmarish pace in much of the rest of the world,
with daily fatalities in India now surpassing even our highest days back in January.
We've lost precious loved ones from things besides COVID
but because of COVID not had a chance to properly mourn them.

And there's plenty of mourning to go around for lesser, but still stinging, losses.
For some of us, jobs.
Missed weddings and graduations and other milestones.
This week, God willing, I'll be reunited with my daughter
I haven't seen since August 2019,
and I know too many other people in the same boat.
And we all have some sense of loss about many of the things
we used to take for granted.

I definitely appreciate the desire to “get back to normal”.
 But I’ve gotta break it to you: That’s not where we’re going.
 We’re not going back anywhere – we’re *moving forward*.

Perhaps you’ve noticed that we don’t talk about re-opening church
 because we never closed.
 For safety’s sake we limited the use of the building –
 and what a beautiful and beloved building it is!
 But the church never closed. We never stopped worshipping.
 We never stopped reaching out to one another and the larger community.
 We never stopped praying and offering healing prayer.
 We never stopped Bible study, book group, adult forum or Christian formation.
 We didn’t stop being the Body of Christ continuing Jesus’ work in this world.

We didn’t do things the way we’ve always done them.
 It wasn’t always easy or pretty.
 There are plenty of things we’d do differently if we could.
 But God still uses us to serve in this world God so loves.
 Because it’s not about a building, open or closed;
 it’s about us *being open to the Spirit*.

So we don’t have a reopening committee, but a Regathering Task Force
 to help us gather safely and faithfully
 whether online or in person or some hybrid combination.

Like that gathering who experienced the Spirit as tongues of fire that first Pentecost
 described in Acts,
 like the disciples who gathered with Jesus on the night before he died
 described in John’s Gospel,
 we too are at a threshold which leads to rebirth.
 We’re in what’s called a liminal time, betwixt and between -- still reeling
 from what we’ve just experienced and unsure what comes next.
 It’s only right that we join those amazed and perplexed folks of that first Pentecost
 asking, “What does it mean?”

I’ve given our wonderful staff the assignment of asking that and other questions
 of their areas of ministry.
 I’ve said that I want everything we do as we emerge from this pandemic
 to be done not by default but *out of deep discernment and decision*.
 I believe that it would make a tragic situation even more so

if we come out of this grasping for a past that no longer exists.
After all, we're disciples of Jesus Christ.
We know that death comes before resurrection.
And today we celebrate the gift of the Spirit to guide us there.

There's a document I've come across by the Rev. Tim Schenck
(one of the founders of "Lent Madness") which invites us to reflect upon this moment.
Perhaps we'll adapt it for a Vestry or parish-wide discussion.
But let me give you a head-start on some of the questions worth pondering:

- What were some of our core pre-pandemic ministries and what did they look like during the pandemic? What was unchanged? What was held onto but offered in new ways? What was let go of? Is it still essential to our mission?
- What new ministries emerged? What should we retain in some form and what will fade away?
- What lessons will we take from this time and how will we incorporate them into the post-pandemic church?

Don't be surprised to find these questions in an email blast later today with a link to send me your responses.

Give it the prayer and time it needs, but please do it while the memories of this Pentecost are still fresh.

I'll be praying for you as you do so.

And let's look for other opportunities to continue and deepen this conversation.

By the power of the Spirit, sent by God with God's Son Jesus,
to be our Advocate guiding us into all truth, *AMEN*.

