

“A Strange Holiness”

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In the parish where I grew up, there was a practice for many years on Pentecost, a dramatic demonstration that echoed the liturgical reliving of Holy Week's journey from the betrayal to the resurrection. For the reading of the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, the lesson we heard today, the readers did something very different. A lector walked up to the lecturn and began to read the lesson, as usual, beginning "when the day of Pentecost had come". But as the reader continued, one by one, others stood up in their pews and began to read the same lesson in their native tongue or second language. English, Spanish, French, German, Latin, from year to year the languages would change and grow with the congregation. By the time the first reader reached the words of Peter, the nave of the church was filled with a deafening cacophony, with varying pitches and intonations colliding and rising toward the high vaulted ceiling to be echoed back again and again. It was chaotic, even alarming. It never ceased to make me uncomfortable. Year after year, I grew to expect that strange demonstration, and yet every year the rise in volume with each additional voice would startle and agitate me. I remember, in a discussion with my mother, complaining “Why can’t we just do it the way we ALWAYS do?” I was a very Episcopalian teenager, not a huge fan of liturgical experiments. I knew the story, what the words meant. I even knew some of the languages being spoken, at least well enough to recognize familiar sounds. The sound of familiar voices speaking in unfamiliar tongues gave me a conflicting sense of déjà vu mixed with an otherworldly strangeness. I can still feel the strange

tightening of my muscles and the hairs on the back of my neck standing up as the sounds of chaos swelled and washed over me.

That familiar strangeness, that physical and spiritual tension, is exactly what we commemorate and experience again today. The coming of the Holy Spirit was not a gentle thing, not easy or quiet or even particularly festive. The Holy Spirit descended on the followers of Jesus in tongues of fire, in heat and light and a sound like the rush of a violent wind. When our advocate arrived from the Father, she came loudly and disruptively, without decorum and without restraint. It is no wonder that we call this moment the birth of the church. What the liturgical theater of my childhood Pentecost accomplished was this sense of holy strangeness, the strange holiness of the breath of God alighting on the matriarchs and patriarchs of our apostolic faith. The primal fear of the unknown, the intuition of raw power's presence, the familiar clashing with the entirely new- a small taste of that day of Pentecost.

But that is just the beginning of this story. Remember that this is a birth narrative, and the birth of the church did not begin and end in a closed group of friends and believers. What the cacophony of half a dozen speakers speaking in half a dozen tongues might drown out is the next key moment in the narrative. The apostles have an audience. In the aftermath of the loud noise from heaven and the bright tongues of fire, a crowd rushes toward the disruption, a crowd of people from every creed, language, people, and nation all over the known world. What they find when they reach the apostles is not a deafening mess of voices like clanging symbols. They are bewildered, because each one of them hears the apostles speaking in the native language of each. What the crowds heard at the birthing of the church was not discord, but an impossible unity. The diverse multilingual crowd heard the exact same message, delivered to each of them individually and to all of them at once, in the tongues their mothers and fathers taught them.

There was no need for translation or interpretation, no need to think twice about the definitions of words or the differences of syntax. The knowledge of the great deeds of God, the Good News of Jesus Christ, was opened up and poured out over the nations by the uniting power of the Holy Spirit. Holy chaos was followed by sacred understanding, a reversal of the fall of Babel, a reunion of God's children in the light of the Gospel.

It is revealing that even such a miracle as this was met with detractors, with those who sneered and tried to twist the narrative and discredit the experiences of God's servants. Where there are those who benefit from division and discord there will always be those who accuse prophets of drunkenness and call believers naïve. But even in this overwhelming and controversial moment, Jesus's friends point back to God, back to scripture, back to the promises that were made to their ancestors that have been fulfilled in Jesus. Speaking in his own language, heard by each in the crowd in their own tongue, Peter opens up the scripture as Jesus had done for his disciples on the road. Having received the Holy Spirit, Peter assures us that the spirit of God is being poured out on all flesh, that all might prophesy the message of God, that all might be given vision to fulfill God's dream for the world.

These are devastatingly strange, desperately holy times. The language of God's love for creation, the Word made our brother in Jesus, the language of God's own heart, is the only Word that will cut through the noise. As Christians, as adopted members of Christ's own body, the fire that rested on the apostles of Jesus rests on each of us from the moment of our baptism and is both the light that guides our footsteps and the beacon that draws the nations to our boundless hope. We have been given everything that we need to do the mission of the church, to be the hands and feet and eyes and ears and voices of God in the world. We speak a language that is

universal, we prophesy in a tongue that is not learned but given. The Holy Spirit is here. What has she given you to say?