

**June 4, 2017 – Annunciation Episcopal Church – Feast of Pentecost**

**Rev. Elizabeth Molitors**

***When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place.  
Acts 2:1***

Victor Hugo's epic novel, *Les Miserables*, set in the early 1800s in France, tells an involved and complex tale about big issues: mercy, freedom, dignity, and the struggle to overcome fear in order to live a life of integrity. The book, which runs for more than 1500 pages, is summed up by its author this way: “The book is...in its entirety and details... a progress from evil to good, from injustice to justice, from falsehood to truth, from night to day, from appetite to conscience, from corruption to life; from hell to heaven, from nothingness to God.”

The story centers around the character of Jean Valjean who, as the story begins, has just been released from a 19-year prison sentence for having stolen a loaf of bread to feed his starving sister and her family. He is angry and bitter, and seemingly destined for a life of crime, until a generous act of mercy by a local bishop prompts Valjean to live his life a different way. Over the course of many years, he becomes a successful business owner – he runs a factory employing numerous people – and eventually he is appointed the mayor of his town. Valjean is now wealthy and respected, a part of the upper class establishment, but he never forgets the poverty and oppression that he came from.

The struggles of Valjean's own life are mirrored in the life of the whole community. He sees others around him who are trapped by poverty, women who are forced into prostitution in order to feed their families. He does what he can, as a business owner and as mayor, to help improve peoples' lives, but the problems are bigger than one person, alone, can fix.

Some in the community, observing the same harsh conditions of poverty and oppression, take a more militant approach, and launch a protest, a rebellion against the government, in the hopes that that will prompt a change in conditions. In the Broadway musical version of Les Miserables, this call to action takes the form of a song, which becomes the signature song of the show:

*Do you hear the people sing?  
Singing the song of angry men?  
It is the music of a people  
Who will not be slaves again!  
When the beating of your heart  
Echoes the beating of the drums  
There is a life about to start  
When tomorrow comes!*

*Will you join in our crusade?  
Who will be strong and stand with me?  
Beyond the barricade  
Is there a world you long to see?  
Then join in the fight  
That will give you the right to be free!*

The refrain repeats again, and then there's a second verse:

Will you give all you can give  
So that our banner may advance  
Some will fall and some will live  
Will you stand up and take your chance?  
The blood of the martyrs  
Will water the meadows of France!

Do you hear the people sing?  
Singing the songs of angry men?  
It is the music of the people  
Who will not be slaves again!  
When the beating of your heart  
Echoes the beating of the drums  
There is a life about to start  
When tomorrow comes

Even though the rebellion is ultimately unsuccessful, this collective action – and the song that describes it – makes the point that peoples' lives and fates are intertwined, that we are called to look out for the interests of others, and – as Civil Rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer once put it – that “nobody's free until everybody's free.”

On the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the musical, a concert version of Les Mis was presented in London. At the very end of the show, as an encore, seventeen people who had sung the part of Jean Valjean in worldwide productions over the past ten years came out on stage. One after another, they stepped forward and sang a few phrases of that signature song, each in his own language. Valjeans from the UK, from France, from Germany and

Japan; Western European countries, Eastern European countries; singers from the Nordic nations, from Iceland, Ireland, and the U.S.

The succession of those different voices, speaking their different languages, makes clear the point that the themes expressed in the song – possibility, hope, a better life – those are common themes. The question posed in the lyrics, “Is there a world you long to see?”, speaks to the fundamental human yearning for renewal and second chances, a longing not limited to any particular geography, nationality, or time. And then there's the bottom line challenge: if a new and better world is really what you care about, “Will you stand up and take your chance?”

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In Jerusalem, at the time referenced in the reading from Acts, the Jews were celebrating Shavu'ot, the festival that comes 50 days after Passover. It is a sacred holiday that celebrates the time when God gave the Torah to the Israelites – the written and oral teachings that would guide and define their lives as God's people. It was also one of the three pilgrimage festivals, the special holidays that called for Jews to make their way from wherever else they were living, to the temple in Jerusalem: “Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene...” A festival

to honor the giving of the gift of God's Word to God's beloved people: that's why those “devout Jews from every nation under heaven” happened to be in Jerusalem, all at the same time.

And as I talked about on Palm Sunday, those occasions when Jerusalem was chock full of visitors was exactly the time when the Romans chose to put their full military might on display. If, as a Jew, you'd somehow forgotten that Jerusalem was a city occupied by a hostile, foreign government, the reminders came through quite clearly.

Perhaps the heightened security was what prompted the disciples to gather together in their room once again. They are, after all, the friends and compatriots of the man who was put to death just weeks ago, crucified for being an insurgent, a challenge to Roman authority – or so the Romans thought; the blasphemous, so-called King of the Jews. If the Romans might be looking to put an end to the movement they thought Jesus was behind, what better time to come after his followers than when there were lots of visitors in the city; send a message, far and wide, that civil disobedience was not to be tolerated.

But God had other plans for the disciples, and so sent a force so powerful that it

drove them from their place of fear, out into the world to tell the story of Jesus: about how grace and love and resurrection were forces far more powerful than fear or hate or, even, death. About how this message was meant for all people – the lost and the broken, as well as the righteous. In Shavu'ot, God gave God's Word in the Torah; in the incarnation, God gave God's Word in the person of Jesus; and now, on this Pentecost, God was giving God's Word to the world through the power of the Holy Spirit working through these reluctant, feet-of-clay disciples.

These followers of Jesus, who had spent 3 years day and night with the man, hearing him paint the vision for the world he longed to see – what Jesus called the Kingdom of God – were now being invited – well, vigorously nudged – to help make that vision real and tangible. God was asking them, Will you stand up and take your chance? God didn't want them to lead a political revolution or make a power grab for temporal authority – God's interests aren't that small. God had (God has) bigger things in mind: nothing less than entirely upending the world's understanding of what is powerful, what is lasting, and who and what has value.

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Pentecost is one of the days in the church year when it is traditional to do baptisms. Happily, little Katie Gruber had the wisdom to be born at the right time for her

baptism to line up with this day!

Baptism on Pentecost is especially appropriate because, like the disciples on that long-ago Shavu'ot, Katie is being invited by God to be someone who will take God's Word out into the world. She won't have to go it alone, though. After being splashed with the water of new life and doused with the oil of chrism that marks her as God's own, Katie will receive a bit of the light from the Paschal candle – a tongue of fire, as it were – as a reminder that God's Holy Spirit is right there with her, to strengthen her and give her the courage to answer “Yes” when she's asked, Will you stand up to take your chance to make real the beautiful, sacred, transformed world that God longs to see?

*Amen.*