

*'The Spirit in You: Free and Frightening, Fresh and Fulfilling'*

Based on Numbers 11:24-29, Acts 2:1-21

Delivered on Sunday, May 31, 2020, Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor

Imagine for a moment, living in a world gripped by fear. Sadly, this may not be hard for you to do. But imagine for a moment the chaos of a clash between poor people wanting to live, and an empire wanting to maintain order, security and its own peace. Imagine innocent people caught up in mayhem, their lives upended, trying to live whether by ignoring the risks or being held by captive them. Imagine a world where a plague easily spreads through overcrowded cities, where all diseases, plus unending war, plus state and criminal violence, have all dramatically shortened average life expectancy. Imagine a world where no one is really a private citizen, where the poor have limited freedoms, and very few opportunities to thrive. Imagine a time when life has little value, from the not yet born, to the aging and infirm.

I say imagine, because I am not talking about our current state of unrest in this moment, but if you went there, I understand why you did—it can seem like things never change. But what I described was the world into which Jesus was born and lived, the world in which he was crucified – hanged on a tree to suffocate – by a government that wanted to shut him down and warn others to ensure victory for local and imperial powers.

In the overall picture, not much had changed by the time Luke wrote the Acts of the Apostles. Most scholars date this book as written between the years AD 59 and AD 90, meaning Luke wrote it at some point between the reigns of Nero and Domitian. This puts his writing of this book between the first and second waves of persecution, between Emperor Nero, who blamed the Christians for the great fire in Rome, and inflicted on them “the most exquisite tortures,” according to the ancient Roman historian Tacitus. It was also under Nero that the Great Jewish Revolt began, when the Judean people couldn't bear Roman rule any more, and so, they rose up in a terribly failed revolution, in which the Great Temple re-built by Herod, was destroyed, and after 6 years of fighting, the Jewish people were defeated.

So, there is Nero on one bookend, and on the other is the Emperor Domitian, who oversaw the second persecution, in which Christians were tortured and killed, for refusing to denounce their faith and offer sacrifice to the emperor. Domitian was a totalitarian emperor who sought full control of his empire, from how people should worship, their public and private morality, to their allegiance to him and his allegedly divine monarchy.

This is the world into which Luke is writing his story of the church spreading, going from Judaea to Rome to sweep the empire, using its famous Roman roads for commerce, to spread the good news of Jesus Christ to every Jew and Gentile alike, with a message of salvation, not through the emperor or empire, but by the Messiah, the man and true God, who is the only true Lord.

So, when he writes about the Pentecost which happened 30 to 60 years before, he is fully aware of all the pain and anguish suffered by believers in Jesus, about the executions Rome carried out trying to snuff out the Apostles, and he possibly even knows about the fall of the Jewish temple, the centerpiece of faith in the One True God prior to Jesus. A destruction Jesus Himself predicted would be destroyed. Yet, what we read today seems to convey the hope of that moment – fully and clearly. This is because for Luke, the Holy Spirit is central to what he is writing,

Luke has seen the Holy Spirit at work, even in all this pain and suffering. The Holy Spirit is the creative energy of God, the very breath of God, the power that carries the Word of God into creation, both to make it in the beginning and to remake it, now and in eternity through Jesus, the Messiah. Luke shows us a group of Apostles who have been energized by the Holy Spirit, who go into the massive crowds gathered for this great Jewish festival of booths, a festival celebrating the coming of the law to the Israelites after leaving Egypt, and they proclaim the life and death of a risen Messiah, who, being one with the true God of Israel, has sent His Spirit now to fill the church and the heart of every believer. This is a moment of hope for the whole world, in the midst of a dangerous and chaotic world.

Friends, unless you have been totally disconnected from the news or social media, you know that this past week has been a very difficult week for this nation – for all of us. In the midst of this pandemic, now more than 100,000 loved ones have died, many of them the elderly whose lives matter. They were killed by an invisible virus that starves its victims of their breath. Then we saw a video of a man crying out that he could not breathe, as a stone-faced police officer continued to kneel on his neck. And in the aftermath, we have seen peaceful protests, descend into the chaos of riots and looting.

To be honest, I have struggled all week to find the words to speak to you today. I love Pentecost as a high Holy Day in the church. I wondered how much to speak about all that is happening, but as the great theologian Karl Barth said, the pastor must write every sermon, with the bible in one hand and the newspaper (or tablet, cell phone, or computer) in the other. But how do you convey hope, when you yourself are feeling hopeless?

So, in our urge to set it aside for a moment and clear our heads to just do something special for our kids, Claire and I chose to have a movie night with Harrison and Josephine, on Friday night. And I'm not sure why, other than my son saw the picture of Mickey, but we chose to watch Fantasia. I hadn't seen the movie in 15 plus years, and not for 20 years perhaps before that. I had forgotten the eight parts of classical music and classic animation from this movie released in 1940. Like Luke's gospel, Fantasia was released in a time with a lot of parallels to today. World War II had just come into full swing in Europe and Asia, and it would be only a year or so until the United States would join in.

The third part of the film adapted Igor Stravinsky's 'Rite of Spring,' which I studied in Seminary, because this ballet reflected unrest in Russia & Europe before most people could see it. So this bizarre ballet centers on the pagan sacrifice of a girl who dances herself to death, but the beautiful and unique music and jarring dance caused a riot on opening night, as two rival factions of French ballet enthusiasts fought over it and their opinions.

In Fantasia, Disney uses the music behind a cartoon showing the scientific view at that time of evolution to show the earth formed, and the rise of life. So in 1940, this too was a controversial adaptation. But as I watched, I thought of the Psalm in our Call to Worship, the book of Genesis and now our readings, because the cartoonists' portrayal looked like the Spirit, the wind, the energy of God, whether it was intended it or not, moving across the chaos of nothingness, and over volcanic explosions, and then over the waters, to create order, just as the Spirit of God hovered over the

waters to create order and beauty in Genesis. I found myself explaining this to Harrison – that’s God in that air that he sees – the Holy Spirit moving to create all things.

We didn’t watch to the end on Friday night, because I didn’t want him to see the end. I figured visions of dinosaurs were enough for a child his age, so demons in the last section could wait. You see the end, which I watched again last night, also, pointed me to today’s readings as I watched. If you’ve never seen it, a devil like figure draws souls from the earth, dividing them, casting them into the lake of fire, laughing, as it tormented those who came to pay it homage.

But then a church bell causes the beast to shudder—once powerful, it is now it is afraid. And as the day begins to break, we see the living peacefully processing in the street, marching toward the church, with tongues of fire over their heads. Again, intended or not, this image spoke to me of the Pentecost. The beast folds its wings over its head to hide and return to its mountain. The souls it beckoned from their graves return to their rest. and the subtle sounds of Ave Maria begin to break through. A new light is shining, and the beast is no more, and it all leads to the garden – new creation.

The narrator says it represents the triumph of hope & life over the powers of despair and death. I agree, for what I came away with was a vision of hope and life in these scriptures, in light of the powers of death and despair in the current events in our world. What we see in our scriptures today is that the Spirit has its own will. And it has been the Spirit that has brought change into this world, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, by filling the hearts of the faithful with love, moving them to make a difference.

On the day that Jesus was crucified, something changed in our world, and on the day of Pentecost, that change was sent out across the known world. The truth is that the world has changed for the better in many ways, because the Spirit has moved through God’s people to make change, to lift up the lowly, overturn the haughty, raise up the sick and suffering, to reflect the justice of God and the reign of God in this world.

The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus are the focal point of God’s love and our salvation, by which sin & death are defeated, but they’re not the end of God’s work in the world. No, the Spirit has come to all flesh, as Peter quotes the prophet Joel, and all who receive that flesh share in God’s work of reconciliation, to renew the face of the earth, as the Psalmist said, and share in the new creation.

The world’s prevailing culture no longer condones crucifixion, largely because over time we have seen it is evil. But while we can say that is a good change, we must still identify and name its remnant today in police brutality today, and the violence of the state. And while the world’s prevailing culture no longer condones the practice of infant exposure – putting unwanted babies in the streets to die – we must still identify and name its remnants today in child abuse and abortion.

There, I did it, I upset both the conservatives and the liberals in a few lines. But here’s the thing, the gospel should upset you in some way. Yes, it is here to give hope for life abundant and eternal, but that abundant life is the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit charges you to repent, to find your biases and expose them, for God’s judgement.

Every time I read the words of Christ with an awareness of who He is as God in my flesh, I am at the same time filled with hope, because I see that God wants a better world for us, but I am filled with dread, because I know that I cannot live into those standards. But if the Spirit of God has fallen on me as a believer, even though I sin, I know that I can repent, turn away from that sin. I can stop making excuses for it to justify myself or my will, my ideology or my political persuasion, and just open my heart to God's will.

The Spirit of God moves in mysterious ways – it is free and it is also frightening. Friends with the story of Eldad and Medad we see an important part of this all. It tells us the Spirit works in ways that we don't understand, outside of the establishment, outside of the way we think things should be. Yes, the Spirit moves in its own way without regard authorities, even the authority of Moses in this passage, because ultimately the spirit is God's energy and it is God's authority in this world.

In the pain and anguish we see in this world, do not miss the Spirit calling out to us. This does not mean that the Spirit condones violence in any way, shape or form, whether it be the death of George Floyd or the riots in the wake of his murder. But seeing these things should dictate how we react and respond to the cries for justice. We must meet those in anguish not with more violence but with love and understanding, listening with mercy and repentance in our hearts, for these are fundamental aspects of our Christian faith.

Martin Luther King said that while he did not condone riots, but that riots were the language of those who are not heard. The text today tells us our ears should be open not only to the prophecy of those in authority, like the 70 with Moses. We must listen for the Spirit in those on the outside whom God calls, to expose our sins and help us stop making excuses for the world's problems, but be justified and empowered by the life and death of God in our flesh, to spread the love, mercy and salvation of Jesus Christ.

What we have seen through cell phone cameras is nothing new. We see more because the technology can expose it. I believe it happens less now than before technology brought this all to our eyes, day after day.

One George Floyd is too many, and he is just the latest in a long list, a list that is too long, and includes Ahmad Arbery and Breona Taylor, of just these last few months. Botham Jean, Sandra Bland, Philando Castille, and Tamir Rice, who was just a young child playing as I did when I was a kid, with a toy gun. Just to name a few of far too many cases still in our day.

I am scared right now shaking to my core by this new pandemic of COVID-19, and I am scared because of the ongoing pandemic of social and racial injustice, because I don't want to see cell phone camera footage of people dying anymore. I don't want to see riots just adding to the heartbreak and despair, and I don't want to see the many good people in law enforcement, made to suffer either, because some abuse their power. We have wonderful police officers in our church, and I don't want them to live in fear. We have wonderful people of color in our church, and I don't want them to live in fear anymore either.

But the solution is not to look away and ignore it by saying it's not happening, but to let the Spirit guide us, and first of all, acknowledge there is a problem that needs to be fixed. Because there is.

Ultimately, repentance is at the heart of the Christian faith – to be willing to see the problem that needs to be addressed and turn to God. I have not lost hope, because I know the Holy Spirit is with us in all of this, calling on us to hear, to listen and to respond, to be filled with that Spirit, and to love. We can do our part to limit the spread of both diseases, by taking a stand, choosing every day to not make excuses – *‘Oh, it’s just how the world is,’* or *‘Oh, there’s nothing I can do.’* We must not resort to blaming someone else – *“Oh, it’s China that caused this virus,”* or *“Oh, if they would just do this or that”* – rather than taking responsibility ourselves.

No, we must instead be justified only by the innocent Christ, Himself a persecuted minority from a far-flung province in a Roman world strung up on a Roman cross for us and our salvation. That alone is our justification, calling us to repent of every sin, and turn to Him, our God. Amen.