

I went to a meeting Tuesday night to hear about the flood. A man now living up at the FairGrounds (and with the 4th of July weekend steadily approaching) asked, "Where are we supposed to go?" I heard words like "Rapidly evolving" and "Instantaneous catastrophic failures." I also heard this: "It's going to be years before we get back to where we were this time last week." What a week it's been for Red Lodge.

I've been hearing about other floods this week of course too. The kind that overwhelm the steady, predictable hum of life. There was surprising and grim news regarding the health of one of our own members. A man known to some of you died suddenly late last week, leaving a part of our community reeling. Our own Myrna Hunt has now died. There was a fire, there has been collapse, there have been local emergencies caused by sudden betrayals far away places. Splitting the banks of our own Rock Creek seemed to illustrate perfectly some of these individual floods. Even as some of them were expected, these events rock our sense of stability, of security - our confidence in the structure of our lives, our communities. The ground under our feet shifts so suddenly when it does and we're left in crisis.

Even as the water was rising, we heard last week about the Trinity - Our triune God: three persons in our one God. We heard that this holy communion of three is and wants relationship - that seeking relationship with us, inviting us into familial union as children of God, we are made family (kin) by this God who brings us into union with itself and with each other. But with the ground beneath us shifting in so many ways (in the face of grief, loss, destruction, and the crumbling of what seemed so sure) how does this matter? In the face of crisis, what does this matter?

The community we read about this week in our gospel story knows something of crisis. The pigs, filled with demons, have rushed down the steep bank and drowned. The word has spread throughout the town. “The people came out to see what had happened,” we read, “and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at [his feet], clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid” Luke tells us. They even ask Jesus to leave, “for they were seized with great fear.”

What were they afraid of? Jesus was here, he had brought health and wholeness to this man, once one of them - literally restoring him to community, bringing him back into the fold of their society. Why is fear the response? Why would they ask Jesus to leave?

In the healing of this man, something they believed was dependable, stable and steady, something predictable and sure, had crumbled under their feet. This is fear in the face of shifting ground, fear in the face of crisis. Jesus had healed one of their own, but in doing so, Jesus had destroyed the foundation on which their town, their society was built. For this town had its own identity, its own sense of stability, but it had come at a cost - and that cost was the life and wellbeing of this man sitting at Jesus' feet.

For that to make sense I need to give you a little theory. So stick with me!

Rene Girard was a French anthropologist/historian/philosopher I've stumbled across in my studies. I know his work just enough to know how important it is, but not enough to actually talk about it with any credibility. But here goes.

In very broad strokes, Girard studied the foundations of civilization - in other words, "how communities form." He saw patterns among communities: They seemed to coalesce when an insider group was established. Simple enough. But to have insiders, you need an outsider. By putting all the division and dysfunction (the "sin") of the community on that outsider (even unconsciously), he is transformed into the source of all bad things in the community. Understandably then, the insiders cast him out, along with all the conflict and destabilizing forces at work in the community. More often than not, this "scapegoat" is killed by the insiders. But the community that kills the scapegoat benefits. It is solidified. In the "absence" of its brokenness, it stabilizes, becoming something somewhat dependable. This is what Girard called the "scapegoat mechanism." (Leviticus 16:10)

This community had found their scapegoat, and had thrust upon him every ounce of trouble that existed between themselves. In this way, they demonized him. Instead of killing him, they let him wander off, cast out and scorned, to live among the tombs. And the uncertain ground beneath their feet stopped moving.

Enter Jesus. The "Legion" is cast out and is drowned with the pigs, leaving this man healed - not only in mind and spirit, but returned to community. The insiders though had lost their outsider. The scapegoat mechanism, the unbeknownst foundation of their group cohesion, had been exposed and destroyed. In the sight of this newly clothed and right-minded man, they faced crisis: The destruction of the community's solid ground.

We are at only the morning's edge in this season of Pentecost, but we know at least that it began in crisis. Imprinted in our memories and imaginations, the Day of Pentecost came with tongues of fire, intimate speech in alien languages, the crumbling of barriers, and unexpected unity with foreigners and God alike. Cracks forming in "business as usual," this holy ground began shifting under feet - crisis.

Using crisis language of his own, Willie James Jennings describes that day this way: "This is... the epicenter of the revolution... the beginning of a community | broken open by the sheer act of God..." And he continues, "we are yet to comprehend the extent to which God acts and is acting to break us open."

The cracks of crisis become openings for the Spirit. To be sure, God did not raise the river or wash away the roads and bridges. God did not break the water mains or the sewage pipes. Sickness and death, fire and collapse are not the will of God. But the cracks such things form in our spirits, are wide open for the Spirit to enter, to rush in and break us open.

That breaking open does not look like that first Day of Pentecost. As Jennings writes, “it will be a community created by the Spirit precisely in the breaking open.” So perhaps it looks something like that meeting on Tuesday. County officials, first responders, emergency workers presenting, no different from those in the bleachers - Bob from my Romeo’s breakfast, Brian at the Alliance church, Nancy from down the street, my server at Marli’s, and all people I didn’t know.

This community was broken open by the swollen waters of Rock Creek, but with those waters the Spirit came rushing in, breaking us open - not only to itself (it’s comfort and consolation) but to each other. The cacks of crisis brings the Spirit and a taste of this mystical union, in which there is no Jew or Greek, no slave or free, no male or female, no republican or democrat, tourist or townspeople, scapegoat or community member. What remains is a single people, a community remade, walking on more solid ground than before.

Are these grounds permanent? Will it never shift under our feet again? We can be assured that it will - the cracks will form again, crises will return (to this community and to each of us). But Jesus has sent one with a word - one freed of our demons who speaks of what God has done, for him, for you, for us. This one speaks into the cracks, mending, revealing and declaring the unity God is continually making and remaking, beyond crisis, beyond hope. The question is - in the face of your own crises, in the Spirit’s breaking you open - will you be one such as this?

AMEN

