**There Should Be Cake**

**Cooke’s-Portsmouth**

**May 31, 2020**

**Acts 2:1-21**

It has been fifty days since Easter and today we celebrate Pentecost. We were supposed to be celebrating the sacrament of Holy Communion during the service of worship. And following the service there would have been cake, purchased from a local bakery with buttercream icing. It would have been as close to party as we get on a Sunday morning. Feasting on the bread and wine of sacrament and following it up with birthday cake in celebration of the birth of the church.

I wondered about providing a communion service. I toyed with the idea of encouraging folks to have the elements prepared at home. I could have spoken the words of institution, broken the bread and raised the cup in ritualistic tradition and then eaten the bread in isolation as you may have eaten the bread in isolation or with your family. But communion is not supposed to be celebrated in isolation. It is most often a communal experience and a celebration of the body and not the individual. When we are allowed to meet together for worship I daresay that the celebration of communion will be practiced with new rules and particular restrictions. It saddens me a little bit, but I will not compromise your health and safety. I was curious enough to search if prepackaged and sealed elements are available and discovered that one can purchase filled and sealed cups where part of the tradition will include pulling back a plastic seal before drinking the contents. Perhaps this will be the future of celebrating the sacrament.

Rather than someone preparing the bread and filing the cups we may need to buy packaged supplies at greater cost.

One might need to help themselves on the way into church from a stash on a table and carry it to your seat in anticipation of celebrating the Eucharist later in the service, observing new protocols, careful not to touch and contaminate, worrying that the seal will be easily pulled back and consumed and not spilled on one’s blouse or shirt.

Time will tell what the new norms will be for worship and the celebration of sacrament. And we will comply and the new way of being and doing which will inspire more stories of the good old days; of how things were routinely done before we needed to worry about the ripple effects of post pandemic. Remember when we passed the peace and greeted one another with a hug or handshake; the center aisle filled with people interacting.

Remember greeters taking you by the hand and giving you a bulletin? Remember the banter with the minister pre and post service where hugs were exchanged and affection in Christ shared? I am reasonably certain that hugs and handshakes will be replaced with knowing glances and nods of the head. I have read that the singing of hymns and anthems will be curtailed, and as the board anticipates the day when we may be able to gather again that the fans should not be turned on lest they move contaminated air around, and that the pew cushions perhaps should be stored away for a time until it is discerned more definitively how long the virus may live on material. There should be cake. And hugs. And handshakes. And people. But we must be reserved and diligent and patient. And despite not being together today to celebrate the birth of the church and the absence of the bread and cup of Eucharist and birthday cake, the ongoing life of the church is still cause to celebrate.

We are still viable. We have discovered new ways to share the good news through technology and social media. Some may be reading and some may be drinking coffee and wearing pajamas as they tune in to the service on the website. I have heard that Val Archibald, who continues to work towards health after a serious repair to her heart, and while still in Intensive Care, turns to her I pad and attends “church” from her hospital bed. This is the miracle of Pentecost.

People are not being driven into the streets as on the first day of Pentecost in Jerusalem but they are tuning in from their homes to hear the good news preached. I am not speaking in any language other than my mother tongue but people are still tuning in to hear. People are dropping off offering envelopes in the church mailbox so that the work of the church can continue on even if we cannot gather together in community. The gospel is being preached in language that is readily understood.

The story is told of a seminary student in Texas who was serving as a student chaplain at a large public hospital. Many of the people who came into the hospital were Hispanic, and so, as a part of her orientation, was given a set of index cards with simple Spanish phrases and prayers. One day, not long after she had begun this position, she was called to the room of a frantic elderly woman. The nurses were trying to calm her down, but she was clearly agitated and angry, chiding them in Spanish.

“What can you do, Chaplain?” they asked.

The only Spanish that the young student knew was what was written on the index cards. And she knew even less about how to calm down frantic patients in a hospital. So she pulled out an index card and began to read: “*Padre nuestro…”* The Lord’s prayer. Her pronunciation may have been sub- par but the elderly woman heard in her own language and understood what the young chaplain was trying to say. The woman calmed down. She smiled softly, bowed her head, and whispering, joined in the prayer. Somewhere, across whatever chaos and division there was between her, the staff and the chaplain she had felt seen. Acknowledged. And so she was able to hear the calming words of Jesus in a language that she understood. This is an important part of the original story. People were hearing Galileans speaking in the native tongue of a disparate group of pilgrims; all of whom were hearing the good news in the language that they understood.

We cannot be together in this sacred space to worship. And when the day arrives and we can be together it will be a very different experience but the gospel will still be preached. People may choose to wear masks. There will probably not be singing and social distancing will still be practiced. Some may have concerns about gathering in community and so providing a live stream may be what is the preference for some and measured steps to provide this format may need to be taken by the Official Board. But the word of God will not be silenced and a way forward will be found. This is the miracles of Pentecost.

On the first Pentecost a way was found to deliver the good news of the resurrection to a disparate people in Jerusalme. They did not initially comprehend the experience and had some questions. Others were immediately dismissive and accused the disciples of being under the influence of alcohol. But explanations were given. The message was delivered and the decision on whether to respond and how best to respond was left with the individual. Post Pentecost and post pandemic will have much in common as new ways to be the church, to celebrate worship and sacrament and to continue to act as the hands of feet of Christ in a new normal will be discerned and modeled. This too is the miracle of Pentecost.

That God in the Spirit continues to be in the world in no less a creative and transformative way than when the Spirit first hovered over the lifeless void. There will be growing pains. There will be new obstacles to circumnavigate. There will be new protocols to put in place. Be found a way for the good news to be shared because the voice of God will not be silenced.

There is a delightful story of a little boy returning from Sunday school and asked by his mother what the lesson was that he had been taught. He answered that it was part of the story of the Exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea by the newly released Hebrew slaves from Egypt. His mother asked her son to share the story with her. The youngster replied,” The Israelites got out of Egypt, but Pharaoh and his army chased after them. They got to the Red Sea and couldn’t cross over it. The Egyptian army was getting closer. So Moses got on his walkie-talkie, the Israeli Air Force bombed the Egyptian army and the Israeli navy built a pontoon bridge so the people could cross.” The mother was understandably shaken by his account of the Biblical story and asked if that was the way the story had been taught by his teacher. The youngster answered, “Well no, but if I told you the way it was told to us, you’d never believe it.”

I have not been telling humourous stories in these reflections because I would rely upon a response from the congregation and the chuckles to ebb before continuing. So this pregnant pause has made me feel self -conscious and a little silly. However, I love this story because it is a reminder that many a truth is said in jest. Many parts of the Judeo Christian story can seem impossible and incredulous. The feeding of the 5000. Jonah and the whale. Resurrection after three days. And scholars have postulated truth and meaning beyond literalism. But the point is to remind us-even in an age of reason- that God is bigger than the sum of our fears and the limits of our knowledge. That God is understanding and accepting of our doubts and deepest questions. And God is capable of great things.

We can still hear in words that we understand. Even if the explanation seems to defy common sense. We can probe to seek understanding beyond literalism. We even have permission to question, to ponder and place on the back burner confusing texts when reason dictates that a text may not be speaking to us in a way that satisfies. Because God is that understanding. Allowing us the freedom to find meaning in our good time.

There should have been the loaf and cup of communion on the altar this morning. And there would have been cake for after the service to celebrate the birthday of the church if we were not living under quarantine and distancing. We continue to battle a formidable opponent that has lessened our resolve, filled us with loneliness and despair and left us with more questions than answers. The future may never be the same again. This may cause some of us to lament. But the Spirit of God is not limited to the confines of a room or a city and our most familiar sacred and familiar traditions. The frustration and loneliness of ongoing restrictions and fear of the new normal will be no match for the prophecies of the young and the dreams and visions of the elders. The wind of God will blow and tongues of fire will remind us of who we are to whom we belong. We will hear in words that we can understand and we will call upon the name of God to inspire and save. The body of Christ is showing signs of age but the church still stands. Thanks be to God. Amen.