



St. Paul's Church

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Effortlessly,

*Love flows from God into man,
Like a bird
Who rivers the air
Without moving her wings.
Thus we move in His world,
One in body and soul,
Though outwardly separate in form.
As the Source strikes the note,
Humanity sings—
The Holy Spirit is our harpist,
And all strings
Which are touched in Love
Must sound.*

— Mechtild of Magdeburg 1207-1297

If you are like me, we are used to the idea of Pentecost as something that “happens” to us, a force that blows through us and past us, an event that happens to us and our community with the arrival of the Holy Spirit, allowing us to change the world (or our part of it). The image we have from the second chapter of Acts, makes this very clear: a wind with tongues of flame alighting on all present, allowing all to hear each other as if in one language, though they come from all corners of the

known world. We know it because it is scriptural and we hear each year violently descending on the apostles in tongues of flame, a gift that would form the church and its model for discipleship.

But Mechtild, the thirteenth-century German mystic, offers us a companion version of something that vibrates inside us effortlessly, love flowing into us “like a bird/who rivers the air/ without moving her wings. Maybe the image appeals to me because I am a musician but having the Holy Spirit as a harpist with which something inside us vibrates is a picture that appeals to me because it is consonant with what many of us have seen and felt this year. A senseless death occurred almost exactly a year ago, setting off vibrations within us and our communities, asking us what kind of society we want to nurture, demanding that we take notice of the inequities we had chosen to ignore. Organizations have sprung up,

committed to the dignity of all people and, for the first time in a long time, we have decided that it is time for concerted action. If we are going to be the people we were created to be, we have to respond to the Love that God has placed in us and allow our hearts, minds and souls vibrate with it.

Mechtild does not say that “effortlessly” means without opposition. She was persecuted during her lifetime, and her writings burned; she also became blind in her final years. But her writings bear testimony that the Holy Spirit’s arrival is not so much an event as a process, one to which we have been witnesses over the past year. Its arrival at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles becomes a way of charting its progress, from the crowd that day in Jerusalem to the corners of the known world. The rest, I believe, is up to us, if we want to allow the Spirit to vibrate within us and work toward the change in our part of the kingdom.

-Fr. Mark

Truth on earth is not, nor can it aspire to be, the whole truth...God is greater than religion...Can I recognize God's image in someone who is not in my image, whose language, faith, ideals are different from mine? If I cannot, then I have made God in my image instead of allowing him to remake me in his.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

I am reminded of a joke that I heard years ago in seminary, that God made us in his own image and we returned the favor. It is more than just attributing to God the things we like most about ourselves; it is the failure to see that we exist wholly other than the God who created us and, by extension, the God who walked among us. The post-resurrection appearances of Jesus among the disciples are more than accounts of the defeat of the power of death; they make clear how differently we respond to this new life we have been given, that the very "strangeness" of God (in Rowan Williams' phrase) provokes us to very different responses to the appearance of the divine.

If you are like me, this response can be different each day and can be pretty uncomfortable. If I talk to my evangelical friends, the only acceptable response is pure, unadulterated elation. But because the resurrection forces me to reconsider all my assumptions about the world,

A Strange God



that this rebirth happens in countless ways, the world is going to appear as strange as the God at the center of it. That very strangeness will be the source of my elation. After all, my faith doesn't ask me to understand; it asks me to rejoice with all my sisters and brothers from all traditions. That has been my hope for all of us this Easter season: that we can find room to let all of us rejoice in our own way, that this God who will not abandon us to our upper rooms will rejoice in our differences as we rejoice in our own.

If, however, strangeness has come to define much of our lives, I am continually reminded that the God I worship, the God over the chaos as well as the order in my life, is in the midst of things I cannot understand, much less explain. Throughout the worst of the craziness in this pandemic, I have assured myself that God is in it, even if I cannot explain how. It

may be in the door that has been left open for new ways in which we treat our neighbors, preceded by the acknowledgement of four centuries of wrong, Perhaps that is enough. But I want to believe that I will be less eager to place God in a box of my own making. God's strangeness may be its own gift, along with the discarding of all presuppositions about my ability to penetrate the inner life of God.

At the end of the commencement ceremonies at my daughter's graduation, the president of the college spoke in a half whisper about how the virus had damaged her voice; she had been hospitalized early last spring. She then said that all the young women in front of her would have to be her voice, fighting to rebuild a better world. A charge like that is hard to ignore. Whatever this time of suffering has been, it has not been wasted (unless we choose that path), not only because no suffering is wasted but because we have a chance, unprecedented in our lifetimes, to remake the world. In that sense, the days after Pentecost will hardly be "ordinary time." In the lifting of the fog of the pandemic, we have a chance to envision the kind of world we want to give to the generation that follows us. May we find our decisions in the God that refuses to be categorized, molded or tamed into convenient images. Rather, let us rejoice in that strangeness, if only because the indescribable God allows us to our best selves. We will need the knowledge in a world to be remade.

What Happens Now?

In general, people are averse to change, even if what we perceive as “normal” is really something that we create for ourselves to preserve routine and sanity. We are in a constant state of flux (things like college graduations, births and deaths tend to remind us of this fact) and, notwithstanding our continued prayers for our sisters and brothers in India and those throughout the developing world, we appear to be nearing a point where more activities will be feeling normal, however we define it. We may even reach the stage when we can stop hearing sentences that begin, “Out of an abundance of caution...,” but no one is making promises about that.

The changes we have undergone are as radical as any that I have experienced in my lifetime, particularly in our corporate lives. Worship has undergone a metamorphosis that I would not have dreamed possible. We now have in sight whatever normal will be and we will have some decisions to make. There is a diocesan task force (yes, another one) entitled “Learnings and Breakthroughs,” which is tasked with making sure whatever we have learned from this past year is not lost. There are some things that are worth retaining, not because we want to revisit our suffering but because they have hastened certain changes in the church that would likely have happened anyway, as well as many situations that have forced ingenuity; some of these

practices can be safely discarded, while others have been a boon to us and how we think about our lives together. The meditations I have written for the past year and sent out as “daily mail” will likely continue in some form. I began them as a way to preserve community during a time of prolonged isolation but have found that it is a good practice to approach the day with something to think about; those who read them can continue to do so and those who don’t are welcome to delete them. I will probably continue to do morning and evening prayer online, even if we have to tinker with the times so more people will be able to join.

The rest is up to our imaginations. The food ministry on Sunday morning and evening will likely be back inside by summer’s end, and the health clinic will continue throughout the summer and into the fall, with the possibility of an additional day during the week for our homeless guests. We have had a book group that has been helpful (to me, anyway) in talking about issues surrounding race, equity and how we can engage their discussion in a productive way. As much as I resist admitting it, certain kinds of meetings are

easier online. The question is how much we lose of real community when we opt for convenience instead of physical presence.

What of our life from the past year would you like to continue? To what can we safely say goodbye? I will be asking this in a more concrete way soon, as we like all parishes, have to respond to this questionnaire. I would be grateful if people approached this task seriously and honestly as it will have an impact on all our lives.

When I was in the airport recently, I saw several identical posters of a man standing with upraised arms in a dark tunnel. He was looking toward one end where there was light and greenery and the caption read, “We’re almost there.” Another caption in the corner read, “Optimism: Pass It On.” I thought it was all right, as far as it went, but I also thought we are not about optimism so much as we are about hope. We have a sacred duty to convey hope to the world and to ourselves, whatever the conditions outside. The only question is how, and we will work through it together, as we always do.

-Fr. Mark

Surveys

for post pandemic practices
will be available at mass
and as an attachment in the
coming weeks. Please take
the time to fill one out.

Thank you!

Camp Faith

needs publicity and
donations. Please let
your friends know and
encourage them to
contact Mitchell in the
church office.

Thank you

to all who have helped at
the church through Lent
and Easter in our
transition back live
worship. Angels all!

MAY 18, 2021