

Pentecost 2019
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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I've been to four movies in the last year and a half: *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, *Black Panther*, *Captain Marvel*, and *The Avengers: Endgame*. It's fair to say I'm a bit limited in the types of movies I enjoy. As I am the only one in my family who likes superhero movies, I go by myself. I put on my baseball hat, buy a popcorn and a bottle of water, and sit in the back of a dark theatre for a couple of hours while the hero's journey is played out over and over in myriad different ways. I would not say these are good movies — in terms of writing or even novelty — but do find them both compelling and entertaining. They feel like ten dollars really well spent.

Most Bible stories can't really compete with the big screen. It's hard to make "love your neighbor as yourself" flashy, though I'll grant you that the Egyptian plagues have a certain cinematic quality — just ask Charlton Heston. Pentecost is a notable exception. It's not a small or intimate miracle — like a healing or a even water into wine. It's big, flashy, and loud. It's the modern Broadway musical of New Testament miracles. It's almost as if God really, really, wanted the church to understand something.

Last week's sermon was a cliffhanger. Literally: Jesus floated away off of a cliff after telling the disciples that the power to change the world was coming. And this morning? WHOOSH — the Spirit of God comes down and tongues of fire alight on the faithful. And the church is born. Happy Birthday, folks.

But what exactly was the miracle? Any eight year old with a firecracker can make a bang. What is it about this day two thousand years ago in Jerusalem was different from every other day?

Every year I find the answer surprising. Lots of churches will have folks read part of the story in different languages to try to get a flavor of what it might have been to be in Jerusalem with all the languages of the Near East being spoken in the public square. But I don't like that practice, because I think it covers up the real miracle.

You would think that after all the pyrotechnics, the Apostles would now be like the superheroes I find so compelling — leaping buildings in a single bound or punching through Roman armies. After that light show, you might imagine servants of God who are 9 feet tall with capes flying around Asia Minor, beating up robbers for Jesus. After all, Pentecost is a kind of origin story.

But that's not the miracle. No one was made strong. No one was made magic. No one was even made particularly wise or good. The miracle of Pentecost is that the followers of Jesus listened really hard and began to understand one another. That's it. For all the fire and drama and beautiful red outfits, the miracle that birthed the Church of Christ is that the Holy Spirit allowed a group of very different people to understand one another.

How much, my beloved siblings in the Holy Spirit, is this gift needed now in our world? When was the last time you had the opportunity to sit across the table from someone with whom you vehemently disagree and practice the Christian miracle of listening — listening so deeply that you understand them? To listen and understand someone different than you in the way that God might understand them? What greater power is there right now? To see and be seen, hear and be heard, understand and be understood. With this superpower from the Holy Spirit, we can do anything.

There are many people in this strange world of ours that mystify me. People around my city and maybe even in this room hold views that I find short-sighted or stunningly naive. And I imagine I rub lots of people the wrong way on a regular basis. But what if I used that Holy Fire that God gives me to listen to their fears and hopes the way God does? What kind of power for change is possible when I see a sibling and child of God rather than an opponent?

If you are at all a follower of the Episcopal Church or the broader Anglican Communion, you know that there are lots of dramatic differences in different parts of the world with regard to the ordination of women and the role of LGBTQ people in ministry. The American church is often more progressive in its stance and the churches of the global south are often more conservative. When the bishops of these different Anglican provinces come together, the words are often harsh. In 2006, a group of lay people and clergy from Chicago decided to aim for understanding. This group called itself the Chicago Consultation, and they began the process of building relationships with Anglicans in Ghana, South Africa, and England. Over the years, groups from the churches in parts of Africa and churches in the US met together, prayed together, and immersed themselves in Scripture. They assumed good faith in one another over difference. The Chicago Consultation writes that “The success of these African gatherings...has transformed our organization by broadening the composition of its leadership and shifting its primary focus to cultivating cross-cultural conversations on issues of justice, sexuality, interlocking oppressions and the ways in which the Bible speaks to these issues.” In other words, by listening deeply, these strangers were able to come together and create justice.

Because of listening, two very different groups of Christians are now partners in the work of the Holy Spirit. Partners in the very work that Jesus called his disciples to do in this world. It might seem small compared to flying or punching through buildings, but listening is holy, transformative, and your birthright as a member of the church. Or, think of it as your birthday present from God. So go into the world, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit. But remember that the power we’re talking about is simple and humble listening. But it is also the only thing that will change this world. Amen.