

A Peculiar Presence, Person, and Power

Acts 2:1-21

1 Peter 5:6-14

John 7:37-39

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Day of Pentecost

Dr. Edwin Gray Hurley

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Acts: 1:8

I

Over these strange times we are living through, I find we are watching a few more movies than normal on Netflix. Actually I have to confess to you that many of my vast plans for projects I envisioned during all this supposed extra time at home, things like planting a large garden this year, reading again through Calvin’s Institutes, and Dostoyevsky’s Brothers Karamozov, these haven’t panned out so well. I don’t know about you, but I find myself too exhausted at the end of a workday, much of it spent in Zoom Meetings and phone calls, to do all that much extra intense reading.

I am however enjoying taking a few more walks, and so is Zoey our Jack Russell Rat Terrier, doing a bit more cooking, then after dinner some nights taking in a movie. One we saw last week with son Peter our San Francisco artist-musician son who is sheltering at home with us for a few weeks, was called, “Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children.” It is a strange fantasy adventure story about this loner teenager named Jake who lives amid boring track housing in Florida, and the fantastic stories his beloved grandfather, Abe has told him about growing up in a home for peculiar children, in Wales during World War II.

The story involves lots of fantasy, time travel and reversal and this Miss Peregrine who runs the home for these children who are gifted with strange peculiar powers. Grandfather Abe grew up in that home that Jake eventually visits. Miss Peregrine has the gift of being able to transform herself into a bird, a peregrine, and fly about the countryside as she looks out for these peculiar children under her care and protects them from evil monsters who, well who want to eat out their eyeballs. There, that’s all I am going to say about that. Some of you now will want to rush to see the movie; others of you will never consider it!

So what does this have to do with Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the believers who are huddled together in a room in Jerusalem after Jesus ascended into heaven? Some think it’s the very same room where they had celebrated the Last Supper with Jesus. Now they are there again awaiting what he told them would be coming to them shortly after his departure, after those 40 days of his post-resurrection sojourn among them. He promised, “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.” He promises a presence, a person, a power; a peculiar presence, person and power, when the Holy Spirit comes, that we may become God’s peculiar people.

II

Upon the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Jewish Festival Day of Pentecost, one of the 3 great feasts of Judaism, it commemorated the giving of the Law to Moses at Sinai. That Pentecost they saw and heard physical signs of God's presence; a mighty wind blows through and fire envelopes over their heads in the room where the believers are and then spills out into the streets, bringing a mighty sweeping unity to a broadly diverse people coming from across the world; people divided by nationality and language, and race; now, with the coming of the Holy Spirit, made one, able to understand one another and receive the message of this first Christian sermon Peter preaches.

Remember this is the same Peter who standing by the fire had denied even knowing Jesus, now with flames of fire over his head, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, he is given bold speech to proclaim Jesus as the one God sent who died and was buried, yet who,

“Was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption. This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear.”ⁱ

With the coming of the Holy Spirit fearful disciples become bold believers, intrepid apostles who go out into all the world with the message of the Gospel; forgiveness of sins, transcending of national, racial, and religious barriers, power for life now and forever. With the coming of the Holy Spirit the Church is born and empowered for its mission, which we have been about for now upwards of 2000 years.

III

This life of faith is not anything we can work up on our own. It is utterly the gift of God. Faith comes to us as God's gift which we can choose to receive. By the gift of the Holy Spirit we are numbered among these Peculiar People.

Have you been angry and disturbed by the horrid, brutal murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis and the continuing racial divisions across America? This is the moving of the Holy Spirit within you - a Spirit drawing us together, in holy outrage, calling us to work together for the healing of our nation.

Has your conscience ever bothered you because you did something wrong? Maybe something no one else ever knew about, but you did. Have you then been moved to confess this to God, perhaps also to a friend or to someone you may have wronged? If you have, this happened to you by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

Have you ever been in a whirlwind of anxiety, perhaps particularly you have felt anxious in these strange corona virus days and you have not known where to turn, or what to do, and then there sweeps over you a sudden sense of calm, a deep sense of peace? This is not the result of logic or reason or external circumstance, a feeling that “all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well” because, however much the chaos is whipping things around you become again convinced that God is in control of the cosmos – here and out where those two American

astronauts have arrived today at the International Space Station and beyond, and your life is in God's hands. If you have, this has been the work of the Holy Spirit within you, telling you, reminding you, assuring you, "Be still my soul, the Lord is on thy side."

Jesus had told his disciples in that Last Supper Upper Room Discourse,

"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."ⁱⁱ

Where does faith come from - faith which alone makes us share in Christ and all his benefits? Here's where the Heidelberg Catechism answers,

"The Holy Spirit creates faith in our hearts by the preaching of the holy gospel, and confirms it by the use of the holy Sacraments."ⁱⁱⁱ

Faith is the gift of the Holy Spirit bringing us what God has revealed.

After Jesus ascended into heaven the disciples did not immediately run out and begin to shout from the rooftops the story about Jesus. They were not yet ready to do that. They did not yet have the courage, faith, boldness to do that. They had to retreat to that room, stay behind closed, locked doors and await their marching orders. Then suddenly at Pentecost the Spirit came, and as Jesus had said, "Out of the believers hearts flowed, rivers of living water."

Like the movie I saw last week about Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children, these ordinary villagers, fishermen, a tax collector, a few women, an odd assorted bunch suddenly become God's peculiar people. These Peter calls,

"A chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people."^{iv}

We are God's peculiar people called together and equipped by the Holy Spirit.

Our situation today, separated from one another, staying safe at home, in this time of isolation, makes our experience similar to that of these early believers, hiding, praying, waiting behind closed doors. And then God's mighty Holy Spirit swoops down on them, transforms them, and sends them forth into all the world.

IV

Peter in his letter reminds these early believers; don't think this faith in Jesus Christ gives you a free pass from hardships and suffering. Recognize life is not a rose garden but a war zone where you must fight against the devil and all his agents. Therefore -

“Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.”^v

But then after the struggle, this wonderful promise, the calm after the storm, the sure and certain assurance that God, not the devil, is in charge.

“After you have suffered for a little while the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.”

Perhaps over these days of separation you have wondered where God is, where is this power the Bible talks about? Maybe God has seemed silent, distant, unconcerned over the vast amounts of violence, racial injustice, suffering, and death going on in our own nation and all over the world.

Amid all we do not understand, hold to your faith. Know that God can handle your anxiety, transform into health your anger, your doubts, your fears, your dark moods, your grief, and your suffering. Trust that these do not have the last word. The last word, the victorious word, belongs to God who has conquered death, and promises you resurrection, resurrection at your life’s end, but also, resurrection from your present circumstances, resurrection from our world’s present pandemic, resurrection from the violence and injustice continuing in our nation. Isaiah writes, “(When) the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field, and the effect of righteousness will be peace.”^{vi}

I love the quote about Martin Luther King, Jr. going around now on Social Media – “Looted nothing. Burned nothing. Attacked no one. Changed the world.”

Near the end of his classic The Lord of the Rings, J. R. R. Tolkein has Gandalf promising the ultimate defeat of Sauron and his evil power, saying,

“He will lose the best part of the strength that was native to him at his beginning, and all that was made or begun with that power will crumble, and he will be maimed forever, becoming a mere spirit of malice that gnaws itself in the shadows, but cannot again grow or take shape. And so a great evil of this world will be removed.

Other evils there are that may come; for Sauron is himself but a servant or emissary. Yet it is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succor of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till.”^{vii}

By the power of the Holy Spirit, claim God’s promise for you, “Lord God, you will yourself restore me, support me, strengthen me, and establish me. To you is the power forever and ever. Amen.”

At Pentecost something strange, beyond the bounds of imagination, miraculous, inscrutable, peculiar took place. Something the world has never gotten over. May that same peculiar presence and person and power be at work in you and in this church here and the Church throughout the earth. World without end.

Amen.

ⁱ Acts 2:31-33

ⁱⁱ John 14:25-27

ⁱⁱⁱ The Heidelberg Catechism, PCUSA Book of Confessions, Q. 65, p. 68

^{iv} 1 Peter 2:9,10

^{vv} 1 Peter 5:8-9

^{vi} Isaiah 32:15-17

^{vii} J.R.R. Tolkein, The Lord of the Rings, p.913