

“An Improbable Event” 6-4-17

Old Testament, Numbers 11:24-30

New Testament, Acts 2:1-21

Recently I came across a 2006 film entitled “Failure to Launch”. It is about a young man, played by Matthew McConaughey, who continues to live at the home of his parents who, in desperation to push him out of the nest hatch a plan to do so. They hire a beautiful woman, played by Sarah Jessica Parker, to entice him to assume the mantle of responsibility and move out and on with his life (Wikipedia).

A description of this phenomenon is described in the ‘Cottonwood’ website. The problem of those young adults who cannot move out “is characterized by low levels of motivation, poor work ethic, lack of vision of the future, inability or unwillingness to take responsibility when appropriate and an inability to manage daily household chores” (Homiletics, May-June 20017, p.43).

In down moments when energy, motivation, and desire run on empty I find it difficult to keep going. It happens when expectations go unmet, emotional and physical energy is spent, and life in general seems an uphill climb through the forest with no vista in view. It is my suspicion that Jesus’ friends fell into such a state after they realize Jesus is not going to meet their underlying expectation that God’s kingdom will be restored. They are told to do what in such states of inertia we all would be wise to do. Find an upper room of our own and wait prayerfully. Sometimes we just need to slow down and stop and ask where we see God acting in our lives.

I think of Elijah after his spiritual battle with King Ahab and Jezebel and the Baal prophets. His life is threatened and he heads into the wilderness, sits under a broom tree and asks that he might die. God comes to him and tells him to get on the mountain for God is about to pass by. What happens? “Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence (1 Kings 19:4-12).

There they are. Jesus’ friends are gathered in the prayer ridden silence of an upper room. They are spent, doing only what they are told by the angel to do. Sometimes that is enough. Just do what God is asking us to do. Wait and pray.

Luke stresses the continuity between Jesus, Israel and the church. The God who brings salvation to the people in the Old Testament continues to do so through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But God’s work of salvation does not stop with the resurrection of Christ. It continues now through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon those people in that upper room who become the nucleus of the church, born and sustained through the work of the Holy Spirit. We continue this morning as part of that reality, still born and sustained by the Holy Spirit bearing witness to and being part of God’s witness in the world.

In his sermon, Peter points out that the coming of the Holy Spirit “is what was spoken through the prophet Joel”. I have often asked myself how I identify with and understand Pentecost as part of my and the church’s experience. The toughest section to teach in Confirmation class is the section on the Holy Spirit. Is the Holy Spirit simply my conscience? Is the Holy Spirit my own potential, the divine spark I discover within that is a latent part of me waiting awakening? Or is Pentecost the great reminder that the Holy Spirit is truly God’s Spirit, independent of my spirit?

I have shared this before, however it bears repeating. My own awakening came through a paper I wrote in seminary on the Holy Spirit. When I received the paper back red marks dotted the landscape punctuated at the end with a grade of ‘C’. All throughout I had referred to the Holy Spirit as ‘It’. At least I capitalized it. What I had failed to grasp is that the Holy Spirit is a person, the Spirit of God.

Augustine laid out the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity in seven statements. By the way, Pastor Eric will explain the Trinity next Sunday, which is Trinity Sunday. But I will allow Augustine to give you a head start in your understanding this morning. He said that the first three statements about the Trinity are “the Father is God”, “the Son is God”, and “the Holy Spirit is God”. Three more statements differentiating the Trinity follow. “The Father is not the Son”, “the Son is not the Holy Spirit”, and “the Holy Spirit is not the Father”. The seventh statement says, “There is only one God” (Phillip Cary, “The History of Christian Theology”, p.31).

The Holy Spirit comes in the metaphor of wind and fire, personified as power and the articulation of speech. They were “all together in one place”, helpless and powerless, simply waiting for God to act. As Jesus had told them, “apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

This is not one’s conscience becoming active nor some inner divine spark emerging into consciousness. This is the very person of God descending upon them, bringing life and empowerment to that life. For me it was that moment when I became aware of the power and presence of a love outside myself inviting me into a relationship given face by the words of Jesus, the Son of God, saying “follow me”. All of a sudden I was willing to consider new opportunities and challenges that God was bringing to mind and not simply follow my own self-interest. The Holy Spirit is God giving faith, winning hearts to love the face of God in Christ, praying in us, and enabling us to live no longer by our own strength, but by God’s strength. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, “If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25).

For example, we as the church do not exist as a means to the end of transforming society. To understand ourselves as such, we would accomplish little. The uniqueness of the church is in danger of being denied as we would find ourselves entering the battle on the same terms as secular forces, assuming the battle of justice and right can be won by force, technique, by simply doing.

The church’s role is paradoxically most transformative in society when it is connected to and growing in the love and image of Christ. “Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me” (John 15:4). We go forward as we pay attention to the voice of God’s Spirit and not simply our own desires and passions. Pentecost

reminds us that God is a person who acts and invites us into what God is doing, not just individually, but communally.

We often hear the expression that “he or she brings a certain energy”. We talk about someone being “a force”. We might mean that whatever that person does is the embodiment of creative energy, insight, a force bringing change and something new to the table.

In this light Psalm 104 speaks of the Spirit of God being sent forth creating and renewing. Speaking of both people and animals, the text reads; “They all look to you to give them their food in due season...When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your Spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground” (verses 27-30).

Even as Acts describes the Spirit as coming in power giving the gift of unifying language, the opposite of what occurred at Babel, there is that continuing role and relationship of God’s Spirit with us. I like Phillip Yancey’s nudging to think of God’s plan as a series of Voices. There is the Voice of God at Sinai, striking fear. Even so, few sought out that Voice or persevered when the Voice became silent.

The Voice modulated with Jesus, taking on the timbre and volume and rural accent of a country Palestinian Jew. Though his voice spoke with authority, people didn’t fear or flee. His voice “was soft enough to debate against, soft enough to kill”.

Then the Voice of God came at Pentecost with tongues of fire upon the church, those faithful waiting in that upper room, shaping anew God’s people. It is the most vulnerable Voice and the easiest to ignore. Paul says that the Spirit can be “quenched” or “grieved” (1 Thessalonians 5:19 and Ephesians 4:30).

The Holy Spirit is the most intimate of God’s Voice. In moments of our human weakness the Spirit prays for us (Romans 8). Jesus describes the Holy Spirit as Intercessor, Helper, Counselor, Comforter, all implying we will have challenges and need support and guidance. The Spirit is “a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come”, reminding us that disappointments are temporary and a prelude to eternal life (Yancey, ‘Grace Notes’, p.168).

Though the Holy Spirit comes in power on Pentecost, in my ongoing relationship with God through the Spirit, it is possible for me to sustain and nurture the Spirit of God in me or quench it. Acts of love for God and my neighbor, fidelity to God’s commandments and attentiveness to what God is asking of me, through prayer and consciousness of God, I may nurture and sustain the Voice of God speaking and working in me.

On the other hand, I can quench the Spirit of God by distraction from that attention on God, ignoring solitude, prayer and meditation. Excessive anxiety about the days’ politics and affairs, indulgence in sensual pleasure, pandering to my carnal desires, or by over infatuation to material things may all shut me off to the Voice of God’s love and grace.

The role of God’s Holy Spirit is to bless, redeem, and save us from ourselves and for God. Let us enter into the fullness of God’s Pentecost blessing and reality. I don’t want to fail to launch in the Holy Spirit.

