

Day of Pentecost – John Brittingham

Ezekiel 37.1-14; Psalm 104.24-34,35b; Acts 2:1-21; John 15.26-27, 16.4b-15

There is a trope in pop music that often gets tossed around when functionally unemployed sonic vagabonds attempt to be profound. When pining after the object of one's affection has become stale, or when engaging in the character assassination of said crush upon their profession of disapproval/complete and utter lack of desire at being in any way linked romantically with the aforementioned "pining songwriter"—when that, too, has become passé, pop musicians tend to turn their attention to the idea of "moving on." This takes several forms, some of which actually produce good music—one thinks here of Semisonic's classic line: "Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end," from the song "Closing Time"—and some of which are completely terrible, as is the case with Smashing Pumpkins' "The end is the beginning is the end" (a song inspired by the 90's movie *Batman and Robin* which, in case you forgot, was the *Batman* with nipples).

I say that this trope is an attempt to be profound because it doesn't actually get at the real emotional conflict that arises from massive transitions. When a thing ends, it's hard. When a new thing begins, it's hard too. There is no way around it; change is difficult and it is near impossible for profound emotional wisdom concerning change to arise from the half-drunken thoughts of rock stars. "Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end" is a line that people of a late 90's persuasion say to one another in an attempt to comfort those undergoing times of change. Yet, if you're like me, and you dissect pop music with the same fervor and determination as one does to, say, understand Hegel's dialectic, or why a benevolent God would create creatures as terrifying as ducks, this line is utterly confusing. So you had a beginning, let's call it the first beginning, and that beginning comes to an end. So it's no longer a beginning, it's really an end. But it's also not an end because it is a beginning, let's call it the new beginning. In other words, whatever this thing is ... is three things ... and also none of them. (I am done with this song.) Sure, we could make some kind of claim about opportunity arising from a crisis or God opening windows, while simultaneously closing doors, but let's keep it real for a moment: this is pop music and it's not meant to be anything but stupid. (I mean, even the most poetically astute musicians sometimes write whole albums about Mexican wrestling in the 70's.)

This is not to say that there is no wisdom in stupid pop songs, including this Semisonic line. Today really does feel like the end of something big and special. It also feels like the start of something new and unknown. We have just completed the long slow march from death to life known as finals and commencement and checking people out of their dorms/apartments/houses. It is the end of the year, it is the beginning of summer. It is the end of our students' time at Greenville College, or the more bureaucratically imposing Bond County Community Unit #2 School District. It is also the end of non-ordinary time (extraordinary time?) for the Christian year. Pentecost is that last glimmer of other colors before we return to the

green of Ordinary Time. It is a time when we are sent forth into the world to see God at work in the ordinary and the mundane. If Lent is the long, slow march towards death, then Easter and Pentecost are the long, slow march towards life. Cause here's the hidden truth in those stupid pop songs and in our lectionary readings for this week: coming to life is a long slow process. It is not devoid of pain, even if that pain is the pain of letting go of the long slow march toward death that has just happened, that has been our focus for so many months. But here is where stupid pop songs and our readings diverge: coming to life is not our work alone, it is the work of God in and through us.

He has left us alone but shafts of light sometimes grace the corner of our rooms.

Our gospel reading today comes from the long farewell between Jesus and his disciples that takes place over the course of three chapters. They have seen signs and wonders. They have travelled the countryside and walked on water and gotten kicked out of towns. They have gone on that long march toward Jerusalem and toward Jesus' death. They have gloried in his victorious resurrection. They have done all of this together. And now he was saying that he had to leave them. Their sadness, as you can imagine, was palpable.

To our modern ears, a farewell address is something for which we have a few expectations. We expect something not unlike a commencement speech. We expect something that will contextualize years of striving towards a certain goal, following certain ideals or certain people, and in the process, becoming certain kinds of people. We expect to be told what everything meant. But Jesus does not give a commencement speech. He does not begin with a joke and then give three bits of advice on reaching one's dreams or making the world a better place or anything like that. He does not conform to the conventions of the genre. Instead, Jesus throws the disciples a curve ball. He tells them that it is good for them that he leaves.

In this passage, we get Jesus revealing that last bit of information that his disciples were unready to hear. When he was with them, the disciples didn't need to know about the work of the Spirit. But now Jesus has to go away and he realizes that his disciples sorrow at this thought. It is to their advantage that he goes away because his work is done but theirs is just beginning. There is something reminiscent of the passing of a mantle between leaders—be it between Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, or now Jesus and his followers. The Spirit of Truth, which had dwelled within Jesus during his ministry, was no longer just contained to him but was coming for the disciples; only then could they bear the things Jesus still had to tell them.

When the Spirit of truth comes, Jesus tells them, he will guide you into all the truth. This is something the disciples are not yet ready to hear. They have undergone that long march to death but they must now endure that long march towards life. Life in the Spirit is coming for them but it is not there yet. No, the disciples will have to wait. And they can prepare themselves as much as they want for the coming of the Spirit, but they cannot force it to happen. Christianity is not magic, nor are we plainwalkers and mages capable of uttering the right words to call down God like some sort of divine version of pulling a rabbit from a hat. Our gospel reading

makes this clear: it is not what we do that brings the Spirit of Truth, it is God who sends this Spirit. And so we must wait, as the disciples and others waited, for the coming of the Spirit. It is not always the case that when one beginning ends, another beginning begins right away. Sometimes, as frustrating as it is, we have to wait.

Cosmopolitan Pentecostal Blues

We can skip ahead in Biblical history to the upper room, where the followers of Jesus have been waiting and praying for the coming of the Spirit. They have been living in an in-between time, caught between the leadership of Jesus and whatever is coming next. But we know what is coming next: there is wind and fire and speaking in tongues and then everybody rushes out into the streets, and people think they're drunk but they can understand them, and it's one big Holy Spirit party. Except that, upon examination, it's actually far more interesting than the way we've heard the story told.

Pentecost is the Greek name for the Jewish holiday of Shavuot, or the Feast of Weeks. For all intents and purposes, Shavuot is a celebration of the day that Torah was given to the Israelites on Mt. Sinai. It is the Feast of Weeks because it marks the end of a period of time in which Jews were meant to be counting the days between Passover and Pentecost in anticipation of the revelation of the Torah to Moses. While not a high holy day, Pentecost was still a holy day, thus making it the sort of event in which large numbers of observant Jews would find themselves travelling to Jerusalem. So when the disciples burst forth from the upper room and into the crowded cosmopolitan streets of Jerusalem, they are doing so during a time when many different ethnic groups would have been present in the city.

There are a few things to note about the disciples' behavior as well. The text tells us not that they are speaking in different languages but in different idioms or dialects. It is not the case that the disciples all speak instantly in Spanish, French, German, and Urdu. It couldn't be, because at least three of those languages hadn't been invented yet. But it makes sense that the Spirit would open up the avenues of communication between people of different and disparate ethnic groups. The text tells us that the crowd was bewildered because they heard the disciples speaking in the native language of each. One commentator has noted that the text does not say that the foreigners were given the ability to understand the words of the disciples; rather, the disciples were inspired to speak in the idiom and dialect of others.

This display of linguistic flexibility is not the only important thing to note about the disciples' behavior. It is also important to note that the ethnic distinctions between these various peoples are not erased, not whitewashed in the name of some uniform urban Jesus follower identity. Instead, ethnic identity is preserved—but not as a bulwark against the culture out of which Jesus emerged. As biblical scholar Eric Barreto says, “Acts narrates the intrusion of the gospel into the myriad populations of antiquity. A number of cultural boundaries are crossed, but at no point in Acts does Luke narrate the cessation of ethnic difference.”^[1] Ethnic identity is preserved because it is into this cauldron of difference, into this cultural diaspora, that the Spirit has been

poured. Peter's quoting of the prophet Joel testifies to this point. God will pour out [his] spirit on all flesh. It will not be restricted by the ability of listeners to hear us in language we find comfortable. It will not be limited by our own understanding of who is deserving of the Spirit and who ought to take a few more years to gain relevant experience. The Spirit is poured out on those who are smart and those who are not. It is poured out on those who wrote honors theses and those who can barely write a sentence. It is poured out on those whose ambitions align with our ideas of success and those for whom basic daily hygiene appears to be ambitious. Our scriptures today all testify to this: we don't get to decide on whom the Spirit falls, nor do we decide when and where. It is our task to receive and testify.

Them Bones...

After the Spirit falls and we are sent out into the world, we mustn't think that such a sending out marks the completion of our long, slow march towards life. Rather, if we heed the words of the Old Testament passage, we find that the breath of the Spirit is only the beginning of that march towards life.

The reading from Ezekiel offers us incredibly vivid imagery of this march towards life. Ancient practices of warfare did not require that the bodies of vanquished be buried, even in a mass grave. Instead, their bodies were left to rot where they fell. The prophet is brought out to one such valley of fallen warriors, marked only by the prevalence of bones. God asks him can these bones live? Can people who have dried up, who have lost hope, who have been cut off completely, can they come back to life? Can they complete the long, slow march to life? Can the Spirit dwell in them?

Ezekiel only responds with O Lord God, you know. It could be a response of humility or it could be a response of stating the obvious. It could be the response of: "Lord God, you know that these bones are dried up and dead. They cannot live." And then the Spirit moves. God breathes and the bones begin to connect, and sinew and flesh and skin envelop them, and they live once more. Even those who have lost their hope are not beyond the Spirit's reach.

Pentecost teaches us that we cannot believe we've accomplished something before it's done. It teaches us that we are not the ones who know where the Spirit will fall and where it will not. We are not the ones who hold the words of truth that others must conform to in order to understand. Rather, we are the ones who are sent forth to testify to the hope that is found in and through Jesus Christ. We are to testify to the renewal of life, to the expansion of the community, to the wonder of lives once dried up now bursting forth with life. Ordinary Time is coming. The mundane and everyday beckon. And our readings put it to us to see the Spirit in the ordinary bursting forth with life.

^[1] Barreto, Eric. D. "Negotiating Difference" in *Word and World*. 2011.