

A whispered Pentecost (John 20:19-23)

John's account is quieter than Luke's.

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So how do we need the Spirit to show up at our Pentecost this year? Through a mighty wind and the fiery, cacophonous din of many tongues? Or via a gentle breath and the whispered commission of one peace-bringing voice? The lectionary is kind in giving us these two extremes to choose from—or foolish in allowing the boldest of us to attempt to have both.

I have to confess that while Luke's account of Pentecost is the one that comes most automatically to mind, it's John's Pentecost that I prefer. There is much to be said for the inspiration (pardon the pun) of so public and dramatic a display of power as the one that drives disciples into the street and strangers into their midst in Acts. It's hard to beat pyrotechnics and great audio when you're trying to move a crowd. But it's been my experience that if you really want to focus people's attention, you don't get louder. You get quieter. Rather than rocking people back on their heels with volume, you tip them forward on their toes with softness.

This is the method of Jesus in his Resurrection night visit to the disciples. His first words to them in fact are, "Peace be with you." And who wouldn't need to speak some words of calm when materializing among a terrified group hunkered behind locked doors?

Yet having displayed his bona fides in the form of his scarred hands and side, Jesus repeats his words, making it clear that this is not just his attempt to calm their understandable panic but the blessing he announces on their life together: Peace.

Then Jesus immediately seems to undermine that blessing. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Really? "As the Father has sent me"—you know, conflict, betrayal, torture, death, that whole thing—"so I send you." Then again, maybe at least a couple of them are cognizant that this includes the reality of resurrection, the certainty of triumph beyond loss, even life beyond death. For those who realize it, that would be more than enough to bring peace.

Now Jesus breathes on them. As in Acts, there is movement in the air and there is clear proclamation. Like Peter in Acts, Jesus here makes it clear that this movement is the Holy Spirit. But whereas Peter suggests the Spirit's presence brings dreams and visions and signs, Jesus declares that the Spirit brings true wonders: the miracle of forgiveness, the possibility of reconciliation.

It is an ambivalent empowerment, an onerous gift. "If you forgive" sounds so sweet, but there's equal bitterness in "If you retain." Still, there is something of hope, of promise in this burdensome binary. It is the Spirit's presence, not human will or wisdom, that makes the choice possible. Leaning into that presence, trusting in God

to guide, faithful disciples may avoid cheap grace or merciless judgment.

In fact, while the multilingual storytelling of Acts suggests the possibility of overcoming the curse of Babel, Jesus' two-part commission may promise the reversal of an even older curse. The serpent had promised Eve, "you will be like God, knowing good and evil." And in that fruit, the awareness of division entered human life: good and evil, clothed and naked, seen and hidden; ultimately, inside and outside, us and them, friend and enemy. Humanity gained the knowledge available to God, without the wisdom and grace available to God. Like God but not God: the very definition of sin.

Now, however, Jesus is offering the possibility of liberation from that sin. The holy breath of Spirit promises presence and aid in the practice of accountable judgment and the forgiveness of costly grace. Like death itself, division needn't be the final word. Even behind locked doors, even in fear, the risk of reconciliation is possible.

This is a whisper to lean into. This is the gift of peace.