SUNDAY SERMON

Is Church Being Born Anew

Church is in my bones, my blood, my heart. I remember vividly the Sunday morning services in the church of my childhood. I remember how they sounded and felt - the soaring stained glass windows and vaulted ceiling, the full organ. I remember standing between my parents - Dad on my right, singing out with his trained voice and his deep faith. Mom on my left, warbling away, a little off tune. The imposing pastor, with his back academic robe and preaching tabs, pouring out wisdom in sermons that were the highlight each week - this was the Presbyterian Church, and so communion was an only four times a year affair. My parents would critique the sermon as we rode home, and even though I barely understood them, I knew sermons were, for my parents, the most important thing. (No surprise, I suppose, that I’m standing here preaching to you!) These Sunday mornings were a given of our existence - there was never any debate about whether we would go to church. Sunday School, worship, and later on, Youth Fellowship were what we did, and although I sometimes chafed and eventually began to question, church was simply part of life, familiar and steady and pretty much unchanging.

And even though I stopped going for the whole decade of my twenties, these rhythms of church and worship remained, and still do, embedded in my consciousness. “The Church’s one foundation,” “Holy, holy, holy,” “Fairest Lord Jesus,” these tunes and words and so many others are part of a vast store of memories that come along with me even now, whenever I come to church. Easter morning must begin with “Jesus Christ is risen today,” and Christmas Eve must begin with “O come, all ye faithful,” - they just have to! And in all the years since I’ve come back to church - finding the Episcopal Church, finding St. Mark’s, Grace Cathedral, St. John’s and now beloved St. Columba’s - those early days have come with me. Despite considering myself a progressive Christian, a non-theistic believer, open to new liturgies, new music and radical hospitality, I still harbor within me those long ago trappings of church as I first knew it. I’ve welcomed changes in our churches, but I also feel well grounded in church as I’ve known it.

So what happens now? Will this way of doing church go away forever? Will my granddaughters stand in their big church in Connecticut with their parents on either side? Will they hear amazing choirs, maybe sing in them, share bread and wine round altars? Will they join youth groups, embrace at the Peace, see their friends each week? What will church be like for us at St. Columba’s - next month, next fall, a year from now?

continued
It will be different for sure. We know this; our leadership have told us this, we are planning for this. Church will be different - not “the way it’s always been,” not “the way we’ve always done things.” To our credit, since I’ve been at St. Columba’s, almost three years, I don’t hear much of that. There’s the occasional reference to some golden era way back, but less and less as we continue to grow and flourish in our mission to Live God’s Love. But from now on, the living will be different.

Today is Pentecost - to my mind one of the most important days of the Church year, despite it’s obscurity compared with Christmas and Easter. Pentecost is often referred to as the Church’s Birthday, and here’s why I think that is: Jesus’ Resurrection didn’t start the Church, even though it changed everything for those who followed him. They had the incredible, miraculous experiences of the risen Jesus being with them, and that held them together for a time, leading them from fear and loss to hope for something new. Jesus had promised them a Comforter, one who would come alongside them and be with them, and, as long as the risen Christ was around, they had that in him. But then, no more.

He left - we have the amazing Ascension story. Whatever and whenever this happened, the risen Jesus the disciples could see and touch and hear and eat with was gone. He went up to heaven to be with God - not too hard to swallow in a time when people believed in a three tiered universe, a pretty hard sell now. Although people do try. If you go to Jerusalem you can visit the small chapel of the ascension on the Mount of Olives, where you will see the rock of the Ascension on which there is the imprint of a foot - just the front part, supposedly the foot of Jesus as he lifted off for the heavens!

The Ascension story is, I think, a necessary part of the narrative that culminates in Pentecost. It lets us know that the risen Christ was no longer with the disciples in any tangible way. They were indeed on their own.

But then came a new day. We heard the description in the reading from Acts. A day of rushing winds and tongues like flames. The disciples were prophesying, praising God in all different languages; they sensed Holy Spirit at work in them, and soon many others gathered all around and it became a huge event, people from all over joining in, some wondering whether they were drunk, even though it was nine am. Their experience was of God pouring out God’s spirit on all flesh, with young seeing visions, and old dreaming dreams, with even slaves being included in this great outpouring of spirit.

It was on this day, 50 days after Easter that the church was born. The Pentecost event signified the beginning of a new time, a time when the followers of Jesus found the inspiration, the courage and the grit to gradually build rituals and communities of faith and a movement that over time has spanned the world. They experienced the power of God, at work in them, the power of the Holy Spirit.

Are we at such a time today? Due to the global pandemic, church as we know it has been on hold. We cannot see each other in church; we can’t listen to our marvelous choirs or share communion at the altar. No glorious processions. We are without so much we’ve counted on as church - all those things I’ve carried since my childhood.

We’re in a barren in-between time, making do with online worship and Zoom gatherings from our homes - and these are surely better than nothing, but perhaps wearing, growing tiresome. It’s up
to us to figure out how to be Christians, not just through this time of pandemic, but on into a new Church that will never be the same as the old one. The disciples no longer had the risen Jesus; but they had that amazing day, that outpouring of Holy Spirit rushing, burning, racing through them - they had God’s power working in them, and having that, they changed the world!

Before going further with what church might be like, let’s first reflect for a minute about personal experiences we may have had that have been like Pentecost. Times when whatever you’ve depended on to hold your life together goes away, and you realize you’re on your own. This can be the death of a parent, or a spouse, the end of a marriage or the loss of a job by which you’ve defined yourself. Things that are happening right now as people die; incomes are lost, and so much that holds life together is gone or changed. When have you shivered in the bleak aloneness of facing an uncertain future; when have you wondered how to carry on? And when, if ever, have you felt the rush of Holy Spirit, just when you felt on the edge of despair?

I experienced something like this years ago when I realized I would have to give up my position as Associate Rector at St. Mark’s and find new work. This happened at a very long, difficult meeting, during which I had to hear some hard truths - spoken lovingly, but true nonetheless. Finally, I drove home down along Route 295 in Maryland under a cloudless moonlit sky, close to tears. And then something unexpected happened. A whole new wave of feeling washed over me, and I said to myself out loud, and I remember the words exactly - “now I get to have a whole new life!” The near despair I’d felt only moments before had turned into a sense of freedom, a sense of a wider world and a larger life, a sense of elation! My take on what was happening to me was transformed - a gift of grace to my aching, sorrowing self. I felt then, and I do now, that it was the presence of the Holy Spirit.

And so on this Pentecost, we, and Christians around the world, stand at the dawn of a new era - unknown and unsought, and we may harbor a jumble of feelings about what will become of the churches we love. Desolation, anxiety, sad, mournful yearning. Where will we find the energy to move into that is becoming known as “blended church” - where we’ll keep these online innovations to our church life even as we gradually reinstate all the elements of live church - our worship and classes and groups and coffee hour and social groups and pastoral visiting, and, hopefully, donuts! Even if we feel hope and excitement as we move towards re-opening of churches, we still don’t know when, or how quickly, or how much things will change.

As an older person, I often think back to times when it seemed the Holy Spirit came roaring through my life, changing everything - like the small incident I recounted earlier. This gives me confidence to trust that Holy Spirit is still at work, always at work - God’s free and unconditional grace at work in the church and the world. And so now, on this Pentecost Day and in what I’ll call this Pentecost time, can we trust and celebrate that something new, some new things are about to born - different ways of being Church, a more just, connected world? Even when it seems so much has changed, the Pentecost story reminds us that God’s spirit, God’s love stays with us, comforts us (as Jesus promised) and invites us into new language, new gatherings, new life. Church was born soon after Jesus died; it has been reborn, reformed and renewed over two millennia. And always, this has happened when faithful people have been willing to step forward into living God’s love in a new season and following Christ into a new dawn, filled, as on that first Day of Pentecost, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.