

“Faces in the Crowd”

Acts 2:1-21

Pentecost

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In Thornton Wilder’s play, *Our Town*, the third act opens to reveal that one of the play’s central characters, Emily, has died in childbirth.

The scene is Emily’s funeral,
and as the mourners arrive in the town cemetery,
Emily steps out from among the mourners,
in conversation with the other people
who are buried in the cemetery.

Commenting on this scene, Tom Long writes:

*Dramatically, act 3 is inspired by canto 8
of Dante’s Purgatorio, in which the newly deceased,
about to be weaned from their earthly existence
as they travel toward Paradise, still perceive
that “the veil between heaven and earth is . . . so thin
that it is surely easy to see through it.”*

*Sure enough, Emily—her memories of life and family still fresh—
senses that she can cross back into the world of the living and be a
part of her life once more. Despite the warnings of the other dead in
the cemetery not to return, Emily chooses to relive the day of her 12th
birthday.¹*

It’s a brilliant stroke by Thornton Wilder in his Pulitzer-Prize winning drama, and it sets the play itself on a higher level: emotionally, conceptually, and theologically.

¹ Thomas G. Long, “Is *Our Town* Everybody’s Town?”, *The Christian Century*, May 12, 2021.

As Wilder himself says, he got the idea from Dante...
but there's also some biblical justification for this idea.

I don't mean the idea of reliving one's 12th birthday.
I mean the idea that the veil between heaven and earth is, in fact,
very thin.

After hearing today's story in Acts, I wonder if the Gospel writer Luke believed this very thing: that the veil between heaven and earth is very thin.

In Acts chapter 2, when Luke tells the story of Pentecost, there's a list that Luke gives of all those who were present on that first Pentecost long ago:

“Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia,
Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,
Phrygia and Pamphylia...”

The list goes on.
And for most of my ministry, I never paid close attention to that list.

Just a list, right?
A list of people who were in Jerusalem that day,
just a bunch of faces in the crowd...

But a few years ago, I heard a colleague talking about Pentecost, and he was talking about the Medes and the Elamites, who are a part of that list.²

Do you know anything about the Medes and the Elamites?

² I am indebted to a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston for calling my attention to the listing of the Medes and the Elamites in Luke's story of Pentecost.

The Medes and the Elamites may be the most intriguing characters in the entire story of Pentecost.

As the biblical scholar Luke Timothy Johnson writes:

“Among these first three names, Parthia is the contemporary empire that threatens Rome from the East. But the Medes...and the Elamites...are ancient kingdoms no longer politically active in the time of Luke’s writing.”³

That’s a kind way to put it.

No longer politically active means...they were extinct!
Their kingdoms no longer existed.

Do you see what’s going on here?

It’s not just that the disciples were speaking in other languages at Pentecost. According to Luke, they were talking to people who were not supposed to be there...who could not have been there, because they were no longer around!

What’s going on?

Some scholars may argue that Luke just meant their descendants when he included those names. But I’m not convinced. What if, by mentioning the Medes and the Elamites at Pentecost, Luke is NOT being sloppy with history, but very specific in his theology?

What if he’s talking about a “thin veil” between heaven and earth?

What if he’s painting a beautiful picture of a new community, of NEW LIFE—the communion of the saints, that is part of God’s Church?

³ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992.

What if he's telling his readers that this is what the Holy Spirit does:

It brings NEW life to that which was dead,
to those in despair,
to people trapped in their sin,
to all of us in the church
and to those outside the church?

I think NEW LIFE, this gift of new life, is the central theme of our text, and it's grounded in more than just the presence of the Medes and the Elamites.

Take Peter.
Pentecost represents new life for Peter.

Peter is the one who denied Jesus and abandoned Jesus...and here we are at Pentecost, with Peter delivering a speech that brings 3,000 people into God's church that day.

It's a second chance for Peter.
The voice that once spoke the words: "I do not know him"—on the night that Jesus was arrested...is the same voice that's now bringing thousands from the crowd to Jesus.

Is it the same voice?
It's Peter's voice, but it's a new voice.
New life for Peter.

This is what the Holy Spirit does.
It gives the gift of new life.

All of which is fine and good—after all, it's the Church's birthday, Pentecost, who among us is going to be against the gift of NEW LIFE?

But we need to be careful here, because the way that the Holy Spirit gives new life is NOT the way you and I like to think about things that are new...

When we talk about something new entering our lives, we often talk in terms of ADDING it.

Newness by addition.

For example, did you hear that new podcast?

Oh no, I haven't heard it...let me add it to my favorites...

What did you do to your house?

Oh, we redid our kitchen, remodeled our bathrooms, added a new room out back...

It's newness by addition.

That's the way we like to work, but it's not quite the way that the Holy Spirit works.

The Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka is a pastor at Village Presbyterian Church in Kansas City.

A few years ago, before he moved to Kansas City, he was teaching at Columbia Seminary and he took a group of students with him to Nicaragua.

They were there on a kind of educational mission trip, and they flew into Managua. That was a Saturday. The next morning they went to a Presbyterian Church in Managua to worship.

It an outdoor church.
There was a roof, there were pillars.
No walls.
Wonderful people.

Dr. Nishioka had been invited to preach, which he did.
And after his sermon, the pastor of this church leaned over and told him there would be baptisms.

So Dr. Nishioka looked around—and he couldn't see a baptismal font anywhere.

But no sooner was he scanning the room for the font when the pastor of the church left the chancel and came back, wheeling in a child-sized coffin.

This coffin was lined with plastic.
Members of the congregation came forward with jars of water, and poured their water into the coffin.

Then the congregation started singing.
And parents came forward with their babies, wrapped in a colorful blanket or a beautiful cloth covering.

And when the first couple got to the coffin, they removed the cloth that covered their child.

The pastor prayed over the water.
Then he took the child and held the child up.
The congregation cheered!

Then he looked at the baby, and he said:

Today...you are...dead to sin.

And he immersed the baby in the coffin.
And he brought her back up, the child covered in water—

And he said:

Today...you are...alive in Jesus Christ.

He did it again and again, with each child.
Today you are dead to sin.
(Dunk the baby...)
Today you are alive in Jesus Christ.

Babies are screaming, the congregation is cheering,
the music is jubilant, the families are crying with joy...

And Dr. Nishioka looked out at his students, these Presbyterian students who were sitting in worship like this: [mouths open]

After the worship service, Dr. Nishioka went to lunch with his students, and it was all they could talk about—did you see that, with the babies, and the coffin, and the water was everywhere and...

And they came to two conclusions:
One: it was terrifying!
Two: it was theologically brilliant!⁴

Why was it theologically brilliant?

⁴ This story is told by the Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka in his sermon, “New Wine and New Wineskins,” April 18, 2021, at Village Presbyterian Church in Kansas City.

Don't worry.
I'm not suggesting we start that as our new baptism liturgy at Westminster.

But why was it brilliant?
Because the Holy Spirit doesn't just bring new life by addition.
The Holy Spirit also works by subtraction.

Dead to sin—that's what came first for each baby.
Today you are dead to sin.
Dunk in the coffin...
Today you are alive in Jesus Christ.

All of which brings us back to Pentecost.

Do you believe that the Holy Spirit adds by subtraction—dead to sin, alive to Jesus Christ?

It's what Peter preached that day.
Repent—which is turn from an old life and turn to a new one!

I think part of Luke's Pentecost message is a very familiar message, at least in scripture—in order to have a new life, there must be a death to an old life.

Even if it's not one's actual physical death, there is still a way in which God calls all of us to die to sin each day, and to be raised to Jesus Christ each day.

Have you ever considered what that means?
Have you ever thought about what part of you God wants to die each day?

What judgmental attitude?

What apathy toward your neighbor?

What standard of living?

What contentment with the status quo God wants to pass away?

Paul once put it like this:

“...if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation:
everything old has passed away...”

In order to have new life, there must be death to an old life.

It happened to Peter in John’s Gospel too.

Do you remember what Peter says in response to the good news of Easter?

21st chapter of John, Peter says:

“I am going fishing.”

He wants to return to his old life.

Even after seeing the risen Christ!

And then the risen Christ appears again to Peter.

And Christ tells Peter to feed his sheep.

And the old life that Peter was living...it dies.

Death and the fleeting nature of life are two of the primary themes in the play *Our Town*, not just in the last act, but all throughout. And at the end, after Emily has seen herself on her 12th birthday, she says, “It [life] goes so fast. We don’t have time to look at one another.”

And then she turns to the stage manager and asks:

“Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?—every, every minute?”

To which the stage manager replies:

“No.”

And then, after a pause:

“The saints and poets, maybe—they do some.”

Of course, Wilder’s point with the play is that we do not really pay attention to that which we ought to pay attention to. Instead, as another character in the play puts it, we “move about in a cloud of ignorance... [we] spend and waste time as though [we] had a million years.”⁵

And the suggestion, the pregnant suggestion at the end of the play, is that it doesn’t have to be that way.

We can, perhaps, live differently.

Which is, of course, the question for all of us, as the restrictions from the pandemic ease, as we are able to return more and more to the life that we were used to living...the question becomes, do you believe that the life that you were living, in February of 2020, before the pandemic—is that still the life that God wants you to live?

Or are there any ways in which God is asking us to see the world differently?

To help build new bridges across the CHASMS that exist in our society?

To love our neighbors with new habits of hospitality,
new gestures of generosity?

⁵ Thornton Wilder, “Our Town,” in *Three Plays*, New York: HarperCollins, 1957.

If the answer is yes, what is it in each of us that must pass away, that must end, that must die—in order to live that new life that God is calling us to live?

I'd like to invite you to engage in an imaginative exercise with me. I warn you, it's going to sound silly, but humor me. Just play with this idea for a moment.

Imagine what it would look like if someone in this church held you up—I don't mean figuratively, I mean it literally—if someone in this congregation held you up, and said to you—in front of your church family:

Today you are dead to sin.
Today you are alive in Jesus Christ.

I mean, that's ridiculous, right?

You're not an infant.
It worked for that pastor in Nicaragua is because he was holding babies.

Tiny children.
No one here has the ability to hold you up like that.
So why would I want you to imagine it?
Because what I just said is not true.
There is One here who can do it.
The Holy Spirit can hold you up like that...

The Holy Spirit says to each of us,
every morning we wake up:

Today you are dead to sin.
Today you are alive to Jesus Christ.

Tomorrow morning, when you wake up—
listen....listen for what the Spirit says to you...

Amen.