

“Far Away”
 Acts 2:1-21, 37-39
 Pentecost

May 24, 2026
 Westminster, Greenville
 Ben Dorr

The title of this morning’s sermon is, I trust you have seen it:
 “Far Away”

If I say the words “far away,” what comes to your mind?

The first thing that comes to my mind is what happened a couple of months ago right here in this sanctuary. I was serving as the liturgist, and had recently gotten a new script for my contact lenses.

Why the new script?
 It helps me see things that are far away.

But my eye doctor also recommended that I pick up some reading glasses, because correcting distance vision might make it harder to see things up close.

So I got the glasses.
 Put them on the bedside table next to my stack of books.
 And that’s where I leave them, so they will be there when I want to read at night.

And on the Sunday in question, immediately following the Prelude, I went to the lectern and said, “Please rise for the Call to Worship.” Then I looked at the Harbinger that was there in the lectern...and I thought to myself, “This is fascinating—I can not read what I’m supposed to say.”

I don’t know if anyone noticed, but there was this DELAY as I took the Harbinger in hand and went [holding it]....and then led the Call to Worship.

Middle aged eyes, right?

What do you think of when you hear those two words: far away?

I wonder if any of you caught the announcement in the news, this year is the 50th anniversary of the publication Norman Maclean's novella, *A River Runs Through It*....

It was popularized back in 1992 when Robert Redford made that wonderful film about the book.

And it tells the story of Norman Maclean's years growing up in Montana after the turn of the 20th century, a softly fictionalized account of his relationship with his family, with his father and his brother, as Maclean tries to come to terms with the death of his brother, Paul—who struggled with debt and gambling and was murdered before the age of 40.

At the end of the story, Maclean writes:

After my brother's death, my father never walked very well again...

"Are you sure you have told me everything you know about his death?" he asked.

I said, "Everything."

"It's not much, is it?"

"No," I replied, "but you can love completely without complete understanding."

“It is those we live with and love and should know who elude us.”¹

What was Norman Maclean talking about?

He was talking about how sometimes,
 in our very own families,
 someone we’ve known all our life—
 can be so close...and yet—so far away.

What do you think of, when you hear those two words: far away?

I ask because of our text for today.
 The story of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit.

And after the Spirit has arrived, after Peter has preached his Pentecost sermon, and those who hear the sermon are cut to the heart and ask, “What should we do?” ...Peter says to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away...”

Pentecost—the arrival of the Holy Spirit—
 has something to do with those who are FAR AWAY.

At first blush, it doesn’t sound like a big deal.

Luke just told us that “Jews from every nation under heaven” were there that day...in other words, those who lived close by, and those who lived far away.

¹ Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976.

And in our first text this morning, just before his ascension, Jesus tells the disciples that they will be his witnesses, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth...in other words, they'll share the gospel close to home, and they will share it far away.

Far away is clearly a geographical statement.

There is no place in this world where the gospel will not go!

But I wonder if the Gospel writer Luke, who also wrote the book of Acts—I wonder if Luke means something else.

You see, the Greek word here is *makran*.²

It means “far away.”

It means “at a distance.”

And *makran* is one of Luke's favorite words.

Perhaps you recall Luke 15, parable of the prodigal, the one who demands his inheritance ahead of time, the one who sets off to the far country, where he spends his father's fortune on dissolute living.

But then he's broke.

And then he's hungry.

And he finally decides to go back home.

“So he set off,” Luke writes, “and went to his father.”

“But while he was still far off—

[while he was still *makran*]—

his father saw him and was filled with compassion...”

Wait. Stop.

² I am indebted to Tom Long's discussion of the word “makron” in his book, *Proclaiming the Parables: Preaching and Teaching the Kingdom of God*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2024.

In this case, *makran* cannot just mean geographical distance—after all, the prodigal is within eyesight of his father, how far away can he actually be?

I would've thought Luke would write, “when he finally got close to home, his father saw him...”

But that's not how Luke puts it.
Luke says that his father saw him...while he was still *makran*.

Makran does not just mean physical distance.
It means emotional distance.

Luke loves this word, *makran*.
Fast forward to chapter 22 in Luke's Gospel.
It's the last night of Jesus' life:

“Then they seized him [Jesus]” Luke writes, “and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house.

But Peter was following *makran*” —
at a distance—
far away...

And what happens next?

“Then a servant-girl, seeing him [Peter] in the firelight, stared at him and said, ‘This man also was with him.’ But he denied it, saying, ‘Woman, I do not know him.’”

“...someone else, on seeing him, said, ‘You also are one of them.’
But Peter said, ‘Man, I am not!’

“Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, ‘Surely this man also was with him...’ But Peter said, ‘Man, I do not know what you are talking about!’

“At that moment...the cock crowed. The Lord turned and looked at Peter...and he [Peter] went out and wept bitterly.”

Was Peter far away?

No, he was close enough for Jesus to see him.

Was Peter far away?

Oh yes, he was...at that moment in his life, as far away as he could be.

**What comes to your mind,
when you hear those two words—far away?**

It’s not hard, I think, not hard at all...for other people and images and memories to spring up in our mind’s eye. Maybe some of you are thinking of that theological masterpiece, the movie *Shrek 2*.

When Shrek and Fiona go back to meet Fiona’s parents...and Fiona—who, in the imagination of her parents, was supposed to kiss a handsome prince and marry a handsome prince and become her most beautiful princess self.

But instead, she falls for Shrek and marries Shrek...and upon seeing his daughter with Shrek—Fiona’s father, the king, wants to run back inside the castle!

Do you remember where Fiona’s parents live, what her home was called?

Far, Far Away...

I think *makran* made its way into *Shrek 2*.

What comes to your mind, when you hear the words...far away?

Maybe you're not thinking of movies.

Maybe you're thinking of real life.

- Maybe, when you hear the words “far away,” what comes to mind is your relationship with an estranged member of your family.
- Maybe it's someone who used to be a close friend, and the friendship has grown distant through the years.
- Maybe it's your relationship with God's church, you're uneasy when you come to church, just don't feel at home at church.
- Or maybe the feeling of far away is what describes your faith—you doubt, you struggle, you wonder, many days, if you even believe there is a God...

But no matter what relationship comes to mind, may I invite you to remember two qualities, two characteristics that we hear about the Holy Spirit at Pentecost?

#1: The Spirit is NOT Presbyterian.

It does not do things decently and in order.

By every indication in Scripture, and certainly in our text today...the Holy Spirit is WILD.

The church historian and theologian Zaida Maldonado Perez describes the Holy Spirit as the “wild child of the Trinity.”³

For example, do you remember Augustine of Hippo?

That great bishop of the church, who wrote to God, at the beginning of his *Confessions*:

“Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.”⁴

Augustine knew it firsthand.

He knew what it meant to be so close...and yet far away.

Do you recall how, before he became St. Augustine, he was a young man whose life was full of self-indulgence and sin
and searching
and striving for success?

It was his mother, Monica, who prayed for him.

Who talked to him, who cajoled him, especially when Augustine drifted into the heresy of Manicheism. Her son was *makran*...and she could do nothing about it.

Until finally, one day, God did something about it.

And Augustine was baptized on Easter Sunday, in the year 387.⁵

³ This comes from Zaida Maldonado Perez’s book, *Latina Evangelicas: A Survey From the Margins*, as quoted by Thomas G. Long, in his article “Preaching a Good Word for the Holy Spirit on Pentecost,” *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost, 2026.

⁴ Richard Lischer, *Our Hearts Are Restless: The Art of Spiritual Memoir*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2023.

⁵ Long, *Proclaiming the Parables*.

Why?

Not because Augustine was so great, but because God was so good. Because the love of the Holy Spirit is a WILD love, surprising us, bewildering us, going where we cannot go, doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Remember that...

And remember this:

The Holy Spirit is not only wild, but always gets the last word.

In his book *The Spiritual Life of Children*, the renowned psychiatrist and author Robert Coles writes about a 10-year-old girl named Ginny.

“Ginny is...from a poor family...

[she] is bright, articulate, imaginative,
and has a keenly developed spirituality.

One day, Ginny was walking home and along the way, she encountered an elderly woman who seemed lost and confused, and Ginny asked the woman if she needed help.

“That would be wonderful,” the woman replied.

Ginny discovered that the woman had been walking to visit her grown daughter, but she had gotten disoriented. She showed Ginny the written directions, and Ginny knew right where the woman needed to go.

So Ginny guided the woman to her daughter’s house.

When Ginny turned to leave, the elderly woman grasped the young girl's arm and announced *that God had sent Ginny to her...*

On the way home, Ginny thought to herself:

“Maybe God puts you here, and...gives you these hints of what's ahead, and you should pay attention to them, because that's Him [God] speaking to you.”⁶

What comes to your mind, when I say **far away**?

What comes to my mind is a relationship in which, at this moment, I would really like control.

I would really LOVE to have the final word.

Am I the only one here today who knows something about this?
Or does anyone else here today enjoy getting the last word?

But the good news at Pentecost is that Ben Dorr does not get the last word.

And neither do you.

It is the Holy Spirit that will have the final word in each of our lives, and in every relationship in your life and mine. And that word, that word will be God's gift to us, doing what we cannot do.

Healing what we cannot heal.

⁶ Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991.

Redeeming that which is *makran*, far away, for each of us...

That's what Peter proclaimed at Pentecost long ago.

And the miracle that day is NOT just that this former fisherman from Galilee was preaching to residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia...oh no.

The miracle at Pentecost
is that two millennia before you were born,
Peter was talking to you.

He preached that the wild and wondrous Holy Spirit of God is coming for you:

“...you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away...”

Amen.