

Pentecost
19 May 2013
Westover Episcopal Church, Charles City, VA
400th anniversary; baptism of 3 month old triplets

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I met a remarkable woman in Atlanta this week. We were gathered at an ecumenical conference on peace-making on the Korean peninsula, where a state of war continues, because a final peace agreement has never been signed. As we stood around before the day's events began, I asked where she was from and she began to tell me her story. She is married to a Methodist pastor in California, and she told me of a dream she had in the middle of the night several years ago. She said God told her to go to North Korea. She shared this with her husband, who told her she couldn't. He said it wasn't legal for her to travel there with a green card – which I don't believe is accurate. God didn't let go of her, however, and she kept sharing her dream with others. She did eventually join a tour group from Los Angeles that took her to Pyongyang. She visited with other Christians, heard their stories, and came home and began to urge her friends to do what they could to help make peace in Korea. She went a second time not too long ago, and this time her husband helped raise the money to send her. She told me that peace means crying together. When we do that, there is hope for something better.

This woman has experienced Pentecost. The tongue of fire lit on her in the middle of the night, and she heard the same thing people of faith have been hearing for more than 2000 years – “God is doing a new thing, and you are going to be part of it.” She is one of those Joel was talking about, “I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and see visions and dream dreams.” The prophet was talking about the dream and vision we have shared for thousands of years, of a world where people can sit down to a feast together because there is no more poverty, injustice, or war: “you set a table before me, in the presence of my enemies... my cup is running over.”^[1]

Everywhere I turn lately, I see the spirit descending on people and filling them with a fiery passion for that great dream. The people who came here more than 400 years ago shared something of that dream of a life where they could live in greater freedom – it was far from a perfect vision, but it had something to do with their reason for immigrating to these shores. The wars that destroyed this church building more than once were fought over differing understandings of that dream.

Both were about a search for justice – the Revolution sought to escape foreign domination, and the Civil War sought freedom for all human beings. We're still struggling over the same issues, and at various times we find ourselves on all sides of those struggles. We're not healed yet, though we do have a bold and blazing hope that God will work something new in us and around us, something that looks more like that great and ancient dream of peace.

We all have a part in this dream – the fiery tongue lights on all of us – and the only real question is whether we'll breathe it in and let God fan it into a greater flame. The same fire comes to Korean housewives and to English archbishops, it comes to members of Congress and to farmers.

I've just finished reading a biography of the new Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby.^[2] He spent part of his life working in the oil industry in Nigeria, and he's let that flame blaze up into a passionate pursuit of peace in the form of reconciliation. He's been part of negotiations in war zones, church fights, and the House of Lords. He's not afraid, he's willing to be bold, and he continues to hold up that great dream. Your own bishop shares that kind of passion – and his friendship with Tory Baucum of Truro Church is an example.

A group of Christian leaders from across the entire spectrum gathered this past week in Washington, DC, to talk about how to model and encourage greater civility in public discourse.^[3] Several members of the House of Representatives joined us for a portion of the meeting, and spoke about their personal commitment to working across the aisle with members of the other party. They pray together, meet and eat together, and come to know one another as human beings, and not simply holders of partisan positions. Finding the humanity in an opponent is an essential part of God's dream.

Discovering that slaves are fully human and equally made in the image of God is part of that dream as well – and there is need for the difficult work you and your ancestors in this community have done to continue expanding to include those who labor in garment factories in Bangladesh and those who are trafficked in to service Super Bowl attendees.

The children we will baptize this morning will grow and learn about God's great dream through you and other people around them. It's easy to see the image of God in innocent children. We can cultivate the ability to see the image of God in people who disagree with us, or who act disagreeably. The fire of the Spirit is God's gift to help that kind of growth and awareness. That fire grows in face to face encounter, particularly when there's something good to eat and drink. That kind of encounter can help us all learn another language, when we see how the spirit is enfolded in a person of another culture. These children will challenge their parents and us with the cultures they adopt and help to shape as they grow.

They will like music that others hate. They will do things their elders find baffling or ridiculous. But at their best they will give evidence of the fiery spirit that lights on them this day.

Our task is to learn to hear God's dream in all the other languages of the earth, beginning right here – to hear it, and as the old prayer puts it, to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest that dream, making it our own.[4]

How will you live that great dream today or this week? The passion for change that burns within you is the clue about where and how to start. Last night Julie shared her vision for a library in this community and the struggles she and her partners have endured. My new Korean friend quite literally had a dream that will not let her go. These children will discover their dreams as they grow, but the seeds are already being planted. We're going to pray in a few minutes that God give them curiosity and discerning hearts, courage and perseverance, so that they may live in joy and awe at what God has made and is still creating.[5] That is the spirit of Pentecost.

This congregation itself seems to be living the dream in a way that draws people together across significant social boundaries – from nearby and far away, from different economic and social locations, into a microcosm of reconciliation. My challenge to you is to let that passion loose, and set the world around you on fire with the same kind of godly dream. Let the microcosm become part of the macrocosm. The dream here has something to do with the cycle of death and resurrection in this congregation, as you have listened to the spirit speaking in new times and challenges. Let the fire descend, listen up, and let go – let go of pre-conceptions, boundaries, and barriers to make that dream a reality. And take these three little ones with you!

[1] Psalm 23:5-6

[2] Andrew Atherstone, *Archbishop Justin Welby: The Road to Canterbury*. Forthcoming from Morehouse.

[3] http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-faith/christian-leaders-seek-to-overcome-polarization/2013/05/15/1bfe9000-bda4-11e2-b537-ab47f0325f7c_story.html

[4] Collect for Proper 28, *Book of Common Prayer*, p 236.

[5] *Book of Common Prayer*, p 308.