

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
The Rev. Christopher McLaren, Rector
Feast of Pentecost, Year A - May 31, 2020
Reading: Acts 2 and John 20
Theme: On Life as not Back to Normal – A New Spirit

After Jesus' death, his followers felt lost. Being with Jesus had brought them nearer to God and stirred their souls. The disciples who had walked and talked, eaten and served with Jesus had experienced the presence of God in a new and powerful way. But now without him they were grieving. They regressed a little, hiding in locked rooms shutting out the world. Some even tried to go back to the way things were, back to their fishing business on the waters of the Galilee.

Perhaps you can relate a little, feeling lost and alone, experiencing isolation in your own home. Maybe you are wishing that things could just go back to some comforting normal. Then in the midst of COVID-19 and the pressure cooker of a society in turmoil, a black man named George Floyd was brutally killed in Minneapolis by someone charged to serve and protect our common humanity. As one headline read, "Gripped by disease, unemployment and outrage at the police, America Plunges into crisis. It is a fearful and troubled time in our life together as a nation.

As our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry explained in a Word to the Church yesterday,

Perhaps the deeper pain is the fact that this was not an isolated incident. It happened to Breonna Taylor on March 13 in Kentucky. It happened to Ahmaud Arbery on February 23 in Georgia. Racial terror in this form occurred when I was a teenager growing up black in Buffalo, New York. It extends back to the lynching of Emmett Till in 1955 and well before that. It's not just our present or our history. It is part of the fabric of American life. (Curry)

In this troubled time, the biblical practice of lament seems more appropriate than ever.

Lament

[luh-ment]

verb:

to feel, show, or express grief, sorrow, or regret

to mourn deeply

noun:

a crying out in grief: wailing

This past week, our nation passed the horrifying milestone of 100,000 deaths due to the coronavirus. As Jim Wallis of Sojourners pointed out, 100,000 people is 500 plane crashes of 200 passengers each, it is 33 times as many deaths as on 9/11, more than 2 sold out professional baseball games or perhaps for Episcopalians 25 filled National Cathedrals. If a COVID-19 memorial were built today and no one else in the U.S. died from the virus, it would need to be almost twice the length of the Vietnam War Memorial wall to fit the names of all those our nation has lost.

One hundred thousand neighbors, friends, and family — grandfathers and grandmothers, fathers and mothers, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, even children — are now all dead from COVID-19.

It is a marker we must not pass by quickly or easily. We must stop. We must weep. We must mourn. We must honor. And we must lament, which is to feel and bear great grief and sorrow, and reflect upon it.

As we mark the death of 100,000 people in the U.S. from COVID-19, it is encouraging to know that hundreds of faith leaders — from Christian, Jewish, and Muslim traditions and millions of people of faith across the country — are lamenting together. We are mourning the dead and praying for healing in our respective worship services this weekend - Muslims on Friday, Jews on Saturday and Christians Today.

To pray for the healing of the nation is to go even deeper than our horrible sickness; we must also see the national brokenness and signs of hope the virus continues to reveal. Our suffering has been painfully racially disproportionate, but our healing must be in unison. To lament means more than weeping and mourning; it also includes *regret* — to ask why this happened, to understand that it didn't have to be this way, that we could have been better, smarter, fairer, more compassionate and just

I was struck by the words of former president Obama this week while acknowledging and mourning the death of George Floyd.

"It's natural to wish for life "to just get back to normal" as a pandemic and economic crisis upend everything around us. But we have to remember that for millions of Americans, being treated differently on account of race is tragically, painfully, maddeningly "normal" — whether it's while dealing with the health care system, or interacting with the criminal justice system, or jogging down the street, or just watching birds in a park. (Obama).

This shouldn't be "normal" in 2020 America. It can't be "normal." If we want our children to grow up in a nation that lives up to its highest ideals, we can and must be better" (Obama).

As a Christian I am invited by my own biblical tradition into a place of lament directed toward God, of pouring out my sadness, my anger, my confusion, my disappointment, my rage, my loss, my frustration, my discouragement, my sense of helplessness. Laments are prayers of petition arising out of need. But Lament is not just a list of complaints. Lament in the Bible is a liturgical response to the reality of suffering and engages God in the context of pain and trouble. The hope of lament is that God would respond to human suffering that is wholeheartedly communicated through lament. (Soong-Chan Rah) In Lament we pour out our inner lives to God, we rail against the injustice of it all to the almighty maker of heaven and earth. We throw our questions of Why, Why, Why into the compassionate face of Christ. We implore the Spirit for strength to go on through the struggle. We ask for help because we don't understand it all, we aren't sure how to begin fixing it, we are

angry that the dignity of every human being is not respected in our nation and culture. We cry out to God because we want God to hear us and to act and to lead us toward actions that might make a difference, actions that will be faithful and peaceful and not do more harm.

Yesterday a friend confessed that they just didn't understand the destruction, looting and fires, it was all so counterproductive. As a person of faith, called to love God, love my neighbor, love creation and love myself, I will not and cannot condone violence. Violence against any person – is violence against a child of God, a person created in the image of God. As God's people in the world we do not condone violence. At the same time, "neither can we condone our nations collective, complicit silence in the face of injustice and violent death. The anger of so many people on the streets of our cities finds its source in the accumulated frustration and anger that so few seem to care when another black, brown or native life is snuffed out senselessly." (Curry) When anger lacks a clear place to be expressed it can manifest as rage and misdirected aggression. The grinding pain of discrimination and racism in all its many forms is the hidden and now revealed wound at the core of our American life that continues to inflict immense pain and suffering.

To be honest as a 53-year-old white male, I'm not sure I feel qualified to speak about this in any real depth. I'm a person who has not experienced what I'm trying to talk about. I've been privileged to be a part of the dominant white culture my entire life. I've not experienced discrimination in any real or harmful way. I've had automatic advantages and doors swinging opening for me all my life. I have not suffered or been overlooked or treated poorly because of the color of my skin, my educational level or anything else.

Preaching on a Sunday like today seems like a huge opportunity to go down in flames, just as flames burn in some of our major cities and unrest continues in the streets. I look on with horror at the tinderbox that is America right now. 100,000 deaths of loved ones, unemployment at an all-time high, uncertainty about the course of this virus and its containment and cure, the incredible strain on essential workers many of whom are minorities and economically vulnerable - from hospital workers to health aides, from meat packing workers to grocery store clerks and

delivery personnel. I'm troubled by the lack of adequate and available healthcare for all Americans as if only some people's bodies matter. This crisis has pointed out the vast inequalities in our culture, the yawning gaps in economic opportunity, the gaping holes in the safety nets for the most vulnerable in our society especially children (many of whom are going hungry in this time of pandemic with schools closed).

There is so much to lament. Each of us needs somewhere we can direct all of this pain inside of us, so that it does not overwhelm us, so that it does not incite us to violence, so it does not lead us to harm one another, so that we do not burn it all down in our rage and anger and despair. As people of faith we can cry out to God. We love and serve a God who is capable of hearing our cries, of attending to our pain, of suffering with us in this broken and troubled world.

But even in our Lament we do not need to be paralyzed by our grief and loss. In fact, that is part of the practice of Lament, our sharing of it, our giving it to God enables us to see beyond our pain and grief to the life of the Spirit that God has brought us into.

On this feast of Pentecost, we remember the powerful beginnings of the Church, the vast community of faithful across time and space to which you and I belong. The celebration of this Feast reminds us that we have been given the gift of the Spirit. And it is this very Spirit within us that pushes us forward out of the chains of our past and into a new way of life.

Recently our Inquirers' Class was reading a chapter in the book *Walk in Love*. (Note Inquirers' Class is not just for new members but for anyone who is wanting to learn and grow in their life of faith and commitment to the work of God in the world and their lives). In the chapter on the Holy Spirit it said, "Episcopalians are often wary of the Holy Spirit." ... "Perhaps we also shy away from the Holy Spirit because we are a little bit (or a lot) afraid. The Holy Spirit is unpredictable, dangerous and

demanding. When the Holy Spirit showed up at Pentecost it was like a rushing wind and a mighty fire, powerful and uncontrollable things. P.292.

Pentecost was not only a defining moment in the church long ago but the beginning of an ongoing infusion of life and healing into the community of those who follow Jesus' way of Love. Pentecost is not a museum piece, Pentecost continues. Wherever there is a healing of division the Spirit of God is at work and Pentecost is real. Wherever there is a thriving of human life the Spirit is at work and Pentecost is real. Wherever injustice is overcome, the dream of God is realized and Pentecost is real. If we look at the Pentecost story in all of its strangeness, it is at its core an eruption of God's healing presence and power into human history. It is a connective and energizing moment in the life of the church, to reach out beyond themselves and to share the Good News of God in Christ. In Christ the barriers which separated people from God (sin) have been overcome. In Christ, the divisions between people can be overcome and reconciled. The story of the disciples speaking in other languages to people from all over the known world is a visual story of God bringing about a new community across all kinds of boundaries that divided including language, race and culture.

The central message of Pentecost was the conviction of the earliest Christians that all people are beloved of God, all people are redeemed in Jesus, and all people, all people, are welcome in God's Kingdom. This is the Good News. This is the loving, life-giving and liberating message of God's Love and that is what we are called to live out in this world.

If ever we needed an eruption of the Spirit into our midst, into the life of the Church this is that moment. I wonder, do you personally want a new infusion of the Spirit in your life? God desires for you to be a part of the reconciling love of God in the world. God is inviting you to embrace the discomfort and agitation of God's Spirit leading you to a new thing a new way of operating in the world.

Is this moment of Covid-19 a Pentecost moment? Is this time of racial unrest a Pentecost moment for American Christians? Everything is so turned upside down, there is so much confusion and uncertainty, and there are so many opportunities to change the way we do things, to change the conversation about race in America, to shift our discussion about healthcare for every human being, to transform the way we care for the most vulnerable including children, immigrants, the working poor,

and more. Recently a vestry member pointed out that we are never going back to “normal,” the crisis we are in is a culture shifting and life changing moment. The new normal will not be like the old normal. I know that this sounds scary and uncomfortable, but it is also a moment of Pentecost, a moment to open ourselves to the Spirit of God leading the church into a new and more vital place, so that we may reach forth our hands in love anew.

In a few moments, we will reaffirm our own Baptismal Covenant, powerful promises we make at our baptisms and confirmations and that we Christians recommit ourselves to over and over again throughout our lives – these are moments when we ask the Holy Spirit to fill us with God’s life-giving presence. The promises we make embody God’s Dream for the world. The promises we make are not private promises. They are public promises we make as a community. They are not only about our own personal spiritual lives they are also about how we live in the world, and how we believe people should be treated and cared for in the world. The Baptismal Covenant does not make distinctions between the spiritual and the political because it clearly recognizes that they are connected and cannot be separated. You cannot promise to “Respect the dignity of every human being,” and not recognize that this is a powerful promise that will affect how one sees the world. There is no such thing as a private faith, a private Christianity. Our faith is seen in how we love and treat one another and how we embody that message of Christ’s Loving, Life-giving and Liberating message in our lives and in our practices, in our policies and in our politics. Our Faith requires real action in the real world and it is therefore demanding and difficult.

The work of racial reconciliation and justice is a part of God’s dream and the events of this week make it painfully clear that we have a great deal of work ahead of us as a country and as God’s people in this broken world. The Apostle Paul reminds us that “hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit” (Romans 5:5). I love this image that God’s love has been poured into each of our hearts. Our commitment then is to live out that love in the world in the most meaningful way that is both unselfish and sacrificial, to love God, to love my neighbor, to love creation, and to love myself.

Pentecost describes the bursting forth of God’s Love into the world in new way. Long ago it transformed a timid and rather unremarkable group of followers into a mighty people of God who spread the message of God’s love across the known world. We are a Pentecostal People you and I, no matter how nervous that makes

Episcopalians. Can we open ourselves up to the power of the Holy Spirit and allow that Spirit to lead us into the work that we are meant to do, to empower us to be part of the Jesus movement in this world, to be people who bring a word of hope in all that we do, to be a people who are unwaveringly committed to the Loving, Life-giving and Liberating ways of Jesus. The opening hymn today is one of my favorite *Gather* hymns. It is not just a song; it is a heartfelt prayer for Pentecost to make itself known in each us again here and now. Listen to the words of the chorus:

***Send down the fire of your justice,
Send down the rains of your love:
Come send down the Spirit,
breathe life in your people,
And we shall be people of God.***

May this become our prayer and by God's Grace may we come to realize that we are filled and enlivened by God's Spirit for the work ahead of us.