

Acts 2:1-21
Psalm 104:25-35,37
Romans 8:14-17
John 15:26-27;16:4b-15

Pentecost B
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
May 23, 2021
The Rev. Karen Haig

Danger and Opportunity

Come Holy Spirit, our souls inspire. Enlighten us with your celestial fire. For if you are with us then nothing else matters. And if you are not with us then nothing else matters. Be with us, we pray in the name of your Beloved. Amen¹

In 2008 I spent three months in Panama, most of it with a seminary program. We traveled to Panama to learn its history, to learn about America's ongoing impact on the country, and to learn about and serve the Anglican church there. We went to listen, to get out of our comfort zones and to create relationships with the people we encountered. We served in various churches, most of them without priests of their own. We were faith leaders for many congregations, sharing our experiences and our lives with people who were profoundly poor, profoundly generous, and profoundly different from ourselves.

There were three of us from my seminary who participated that summer. Not being a Spanish speaker, I wanted to take language lessons in Panama and so I went ahead of my classmates. Arrangements were made for me to stay in the diocesan compound, and for a Spanish teacher to come to the compound for lessons each weekday. I was to be met at the airport by the head of the program in Panama, introduced to the diocesan staff and shown around. All of the arrangements seemed a bit vague, but I was assured by my professor that while things didn't run like clockwork in Panama, all would be well.

And it seemed that it would be. When I arrived, I was greeted with great enthusiasm and a very warm welcome. I was taken to the diocesan compound and introduced to several people. I was given a tour of the grounds, then taken to the kitchen told I could eat whatever was there and that the next day we would head out to the markets where I would be able to buy the food of my choosing. I knew that once the other seminarians arrived, we would be traveling and worshipping and eating together, but for these weeks of language lessons on my own, I'd need to fend for myself. No problem, thought I, I've done that most all my adult life.

After eating some crackers and drinking some sort of soda that first night, I returned to my room. It was a concrete block building, with open space at the top of the walls. I had a bed with sheets, a pillow, a towel and a rod to hang my clothes on. It was stiflingly hot. There were lots of bugs. And I was completely and utterly alone once the diocesan workers left for the day. It

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor opens many of her sermons with this prayer.

wasn't so much scary as it was unsettling. I had been told not to leave the campus because it wasn't safe. It was suggested that I stay in my room, though the bathroom was elsewhere. And so I sat on my bed that first night, attempted to read the Spanish language books I brought with me, and tried not to cry.

Weeping may stay for the night, the psalmist says, but joy comes in the morning. The morning dawned beautiful and bright, and not so sweltering as it had been the night before. My language instruction was to be arranged that day, and we were going into town to do some shopping. I was admonished to hold tight to my purse and keep alert at all times. I bought some beverages, some soup and vegetables that could be cooked in a pot on one burner, and cheese and crackers to soothe my soul. Our lunch that day was a Panamanian delicacy I would never have imagined and will never forget - calves hoof soup in a Styrofoam bowl from the local food stand. As you know, I am normally a very enthusiastic eater, but I had a little trouble with the calves hoof soup. I did finish most of it. And that little tiny bit of trouble I was having? Well, that was only the beginning.

My language teacher didn't show up that afternoon. My lessons had been set up with a language school in Panama City, but the arrangements had been made in the US. Apparently, there was a glitch or two and it took several days for the instructor to finally arrive. She spoke no English and I spoke no Spanish which could have turned out to be a great immersion experience except that it wasn't immersion. It was two hours in the afternoon and we never did get very far. And in the meantime, my host, the only English speaker around other than the Bishop and his wife, had a car accident and was totally out of commission. He did fully recover, thanks be to God, but he was laid up for several weeks. That left me on my own, and totally out of my element. The days were long and the nights were longer. The language teacher stopped coming and I resorted to my phrase books. I prayed, mostly without ceasing, but it was that sort of desperate "help me, help me, help me" praying that comes when we find ourselves utterly ill-equipped to face the moment we find ourselves in. It definitely wasn't the "come Holy Spirit, fill the heart of your faithful one" sort of praying.

I could go on and on about everything else that went wrong on that trip – everything from the Panamanian program director being laid up to my seminarian Program director being attacked in her car and leaving the country, to being robbed in that very store I was taken to my first day, to finding myself face to face with an armed gunman who walked into a rectory I was staying in ... but the moment I remember most clearly about that journey was seeing my fellow seminarians walk off the plane and greeting me in my own mother tongue. After weeks of understanding so very little of what was going on around me, hearing my own language was balm for my soul. I think about that every year when Pentecost rolls around.

Pentecost means 50th. For us it's the 50th day after Easter, but Pentecost existed long before Jesus walked the earth. The Pentecost pilgrims who filled the streets in Jerusalem some two thousand years ago had come to celebrate SHA-VOO-OAT, the festival of weeks, a harvest festival that falls 50 days after Passover. Faithful Jews and their animals traveled many days to

Jerusalem, bearing offerings - the first fruits of their annual harvests. People came from everywhere, and as you might imagine, it was very chaotic! People with different customs, different clothing, different ideals, ideas and languages all converged in Jerusalem for a festival they thought would be like every other Shavuot they'd been to. But Jerusalem was in a bit of an upheaval. Political and religious tensions were running high, and the disciples were safely tucked away in someone's house. But suddenly a huge wind blew in filling the whole city with such force and noise that no one could even hear themselves speak.

And when that wind died down, there was a cacophony of voices so loud that people all throughout the city came running, calling out to others who called out to others who called out to others, all of them running to see the tongues that looked like fire and to hear of the wonderful works of God told to each one of them in their own native language. People from every nation under heaven heard those disciples speaking as if God's reconciling and redemptive story was just for them. And it was.

The Holy Spirit Jesus had breathed into the disciples on that last night before he died, came into the hearts of thousands of people in Jerusalem that day, speaking God's mighty deeds of power in God's language of love – the language that is every person's mother tongue. It was the language that made them a community of believers marked as God's own, the community that became the new church, the Body of Christ in the world. When God's Holy Spirit came into God's people, that Spirit came into community, making even more community. We're told that little church went from 120 people to 3,000 in just one day, and the disciples who thought their story was over when Jesus told them he was returning to his Father, realized their story was just beginning.

The people who had come from every nation under heaven that day, thought they were coming back to the same festival they had come to a year before. But everything had changed. Oh, they came back to the same place they had always come, they brought their offerings as they always had, but the whole wide world had changed, and they were changed with it. Sounds strangely familiar, doesn't it? In two weeks time, we'll be coming back to church for the first time in over a year. And while we might be thinking we're finally returning to our old life, the truth is, everything has changed. We've been a bit of a diaspora ourselves, dispersed from our church home, separated from our community. And now we are about to come together again, back to our place, back to our liturgy, back to the sacraments... but everything has changed, including ourselves. Who will we be when we regather? There are people who aren't coming back into our community who were with us before. There are people who will join us who haven't been here before. What will be the same? What will be different? What will we bring with us from our old life and what do we want to leave behind? What is the Spirit calling us into?

When we come together again, we won't be who we were before. But Jesus has promised that God's Holy Spirit, the Spirit who speaks to each one of us in the language of our hearts, will be

with us always – THAT is what hasn't changed. And with God's Holy Spirit present with us and in us, we will begin the new story God is calling us into.

Please pray with me.

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.