

FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT



Alice Fleming Townley
May 31
Pentecost
Acts 2:1-21

The angel Gabriel came to Mary and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” And Mary wondered what in the world was happening. The angel continued, “Do not be afraid, Mary . . . And now, you will bear a son, Jesus.” “How can this be?” Mary asked. Gabriel said to her. The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. The child to be born will be the very son of God.” . . . And now your cousin Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son. For nothing is impossible with God.”ⁱ

In her bewilderment, Mary went to visit Elizabeth and stayed about 3 months. They embraced and felt the new life leap within. In their long walks and late-night talks, fears, desires, and tears flowed. They told each other stories of their experience of the Holy, and that of their ancestors. And Mary began to sing the song of their grandmother Hannah, “My soul magnifies the Lord . . . He has brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly.”ⁱⁱ In the time she spent with Elizabeth, Mary claimed her voice, mind, and body. She understood God wanted to partner with her. She knew she was to be a *theotokos*, a God bearer in her place and in her time.

May 31st is the Feast Day which celebrates the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth. Historically, this is celebrated in a tradition other than my own. I didn’t even know there was a holiday for this beloved story until I looked up the readings for Pentecost, whose date varies, and saw these two converge this year.

As the followers of Jesus gathered for Pentecost, they were still remembering those words that came from the angels after Jesus ascended. The Spirit would be coming upon them with power, they would be witnesses in all the earth. As they waited, uncertain about the future, they had turned to one another and to prayer. I am sure there were more long walks and late night talks. And it was at that Pentecost gathering, the Spirit came like the rush of a mighty wind filling each one and like fire which danced in the minds and tongues of them all. They began to speak in new ways, new languages, as the Spirit made possible. And the crowd of Jews that had come from other countries wondered what was happening, “Are not these Galileans? And they speak in ways we understand, all of us in our own language.” Some scoffed. They are just drunk.

And Peter, who could not find the words that night in the courtyard, Peter arose and proclaimed, “Remember the prophet Joel and how he said,

God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
18 Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy. iii

As these two feast days of the Visitation and Pentecost converge, I see patterns. We hear proclamations to Mary and to those followers of Jesus—you will be God bearers, you will be witnesses. We hear them respond as we would, “How can this be?” And the promise, “The Spirit will come upon you and make this possible.” With Mary and Elizabeth and those early followers like Peter and Mary Magdalene we see them drawing strength from their relationships with each other, and as they retold the stories of God in their own lives and in the scriptures. They received power from the Spirit to speak, sing, and do more than they had imagined possible. They rose into their roles within God’s saving movement.

On March 12 I began to hear rumors of a church cancelling worship for Sunday in Lansing, and I scoffed. By March 13, some of us were in the sanctuary experimenting with Facebook live ‘just in case.’ By Sunday March 15, we were live streaming thanks to Carl Lira and Matt Pearson. And in the days that followed we helped each other learn Zoom so we could keep meeting to sing, pray, and talk with each other. Teams of staff and lay leaders set up online giving, increased connectivity, checked in with our justice and mission workers to give support, celebrated Rob’s retirement, finished an Interim Pastor Search and started two more searches, regraded storm water drainage and addressed building needs and started planning for the future with Covid. I heard one of you say last week, “This may sound strange, but I feel more engaged in church than I ever was before Covid.” And another said, “I like being able to come to worship in my pajamas.” And another, “I think our congregation is coming together and we are closer now than ever before.”

And I see the patterns from the Biblical stories in our own. We wondered, “How can this be?” We are still learning and fumbling and talking. I see those in pain, reaching out to comfort others and in so doing witnessing to all of us. And I wonder who is missing and who we might we still reach across the distance. The Spirit is at work within us giving insight and strength. We are drawing from our relationships with one another, the stories of our faith, and what we know in our bones. We have new words, skills, and ways of being. We are capable of more than we had imagined as we seek to bring the good news of God’s transformative love and presence in our time and our place.

When Covid hit we in were in the middle of our Lenten Anti-Racism series. Rev. Liz Miller was weekly expanding our vocabulary around white privilege, personal, cultural, institutional, and systemic racism. She talked to us as a white Christian about our on-going

journeys of deepening awareness, becoming allies, and increasing action. She shared with us how she answered her call into the ministry as she sensed Jesus' call on her life and the church to do anti-racism work. Months later we see how Covid has disproportionately ravaged black and Latino communities, and recent videos have exposed the violence and murder of black lives, and her voice echoes in our hearts and minds.

Rev. William Lamar IV, the pastor of Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C. wrote this week, "What kind of God-talk makes possible a refusal to provide the universal health care that may have mitigated this crisis? What kind of God-talk makes possible a refusal to invest the money necessary to end homelessness? What kind of God-talk makes possible the racializing of criminality and poverty? . . . The injustices that many communities are experiencing as a result of the novel coronavirus are inextricably linked to this theology. Political systems require a theological system. . . COVID-19 -- and its impact on black and brown communities -- is the American empire in viral form. It lodges itself among the poor and feasts upon them. This bad theology of who belongs and who does not, of who is worthy and who is not, has the blood of my parishioners on its hands."^{iv}

What cries do you cry? What dreams do you dream? What visions? We in the church of Jesus have a gospel to proclaim that Covid cannot stop, if anything, Covid exposes the urgency. We wonder how and we remember the steps on the journey of being allies include ongoing awareness, confession, and action. I trust that as we ask that in prayer and conversation, the spirit will lead and empower. We remember the stories of the Visitation and of Pentecost. We remember Mary, Elizabeth, and Peter, Matthew and Mary Magdeline wondered if they could do what God called them to do. And we identify. We turn towards one another for conversation, and new and relevant ways to be church in this time. We remember how the Holy Spirit leads the way; bridges barriers; and gives words to sing, proclaim, and embody. We trust God's Spirit will continue to move through us in ways that save. God's Spirit fills the young and the old, the women and the men, the slave and the free, those of every nation and everyone in between. "Fear not, the Lord is with You and the Holy Spirit will come upon you. And you will be my witnesses." Amen

ⁱ Luke 1:26-38

ⁱⁱ Luke 1:39-57

ⁱⁱⁱ Acts 2:17-18

^{iv} William H. Lamar IV, "It's not just the coronavirus -- bad theology is killing us," *Faith and Leadership*, Tuesday, May 26, 2020, <https://faithandleadership.com/william-h-lamar-iv-its-not-just-coronavirus-bad-theology-killing-us?fbclid=IwAR3G46VwOgRTFTM6F2g70rs0jeTHS41Nru1NX5Ld-SURWtkdsjyJs4jCkPk>