

Pentecost—A Story of Awakening!

Last Sunday, we sang one of Pete Seeger’s original songs “*Turn, Turn, Turn*”, a unique pop hit since its lyrics reflect the Bible, the Book of Ecclesiastes.

Seeger and his 4 part harmony group—the Weavers —did reach the top of the US music charts with a Number One hit record.

Not long after, when Seeger was called before Congress to name his personal and political associations, he faced a federal prison sentence—when instead of pleading the 5th amendment, he told Congress:

"I am not going to answer any questions as to my associations, my philosophical or religious beliefs or my political beliefs, or how I voted in any election, or any of these private affairs. I think these are very improper questions for any American to be asked, especially under such compulsion as this."

Seeger's refusal to answer questions that he believed violated his fundamental constitutional rights led to an indictment for contempt of Congress.

Later a jury convicted him, and a judge sentenced him to ten 1-year terms in jail.

Although the conviction was later overturned, Seeger and The Weavers were blacklisted, their commercial music career destroyed.

When they went to perform an outdoor concert in upstate New York, a dangerous rock throwing mob surrounded their car and was about to drag them out before the driver was able to accelerate and pull away.

Still, the song that has forever cemented Pete Seeger and “The Weavers” reputation—was a song from South Africa entitled “Wimoweh”.

Later popularized in our country as “the Lion Sleeps Tonight”

Wimoweh, or Urim-beh-bay—in Zulu means “*You’re a lion.*”

I want you to hear a short version of it to give this message added buoyancy!

The song, in Pete Seeger’s mind was about **awakening**.

The lion represents the great king of the Zulu people—Shaka Zulu.

The reference to the lion sleeping was a coded message that British rule over the African people of South Africa would come to an end when the *Lion Who Sleeps Tonight*, one day wakes up.

Wimoweh!

Urim-beh-bay!

Wake up!

The Lion is waking up!

The high tenor voice you will hear is Seeger's.

(Play song)

Wake up!

Here is an inner action of the spirit each of us is summoned to make today.

Awaken!

Remember when we confessed together earlier—we have been asleep?

Let's wake up!

Remember what the Buddha said, after being under the Bodhi tree for a long time, and asked what he was, he replied:

"I am awake."

Are you awake?

Are you ready to stop sleeping and start waking up?

The story of the first Pentecost is a story of awakening.

The symbols of awakening are **wind**—and **fire**.

It takes a mighty wind!

And it takes burning tongues of fire!....

Now—fire!—throughout the Bible—is an image of transformation!

Think of Moses before the burning bush!—hearing immediately in front of him, the voice of God.

Think of the three Jewish youth who refused to bow to the King and were thrown into a fiery furnace, where God gave them power to stay alive!

In my mind, this is even what happens to Lot's wife. I think she was turning around to go back into Sodom and Gomorrah to aid the people who were left without help or comfort in the burning city.

The geological formation known as the **pillar of salt**, which gave rise to the story— is a memorial to Lot's wife's transformative action.

Fire!— burns away your old ways!—so you can act on behalf of a new reality!

This is what is happening right now—on a global scale.

Fire is burning away our old ways so we can act on behalf of a new reality!

One of the arts experiences we have temporarily lost in this pandemic is a play we were going to stage in April called "*Nothing Comes to Sleepers*" by Jacqueline Gafford.

The drama unfolds in a beauty salon here in Kansas City on the day Dr. King was murdered.

As the radio bulletins blast into the salon, the suggestion in the drama is that most of the customers there have been asleep to the lack of freedom and equality all around them and within them.

King's murder wakes them up.

Another temporary arts loss is a stage play of mine—*Bottle of Fire*—which was to be staged in a few weeks in June, and tells the story of some people here in the Midwest waking up on being confronted with a deadly act of racist terrorism.

Sound familiar?

I think that's what happened to many of the people around Jesus.
His crucifixion woke them up!

I think that happened on a smaller scale when our church burned down.
 Many of us suddenly woke up!
 And began to act on behalf of anew reality! And we are still waking up today!

Now— the Covid 19 pandemic has awakened people all over the planet and the murder of George Floyd has done the same here in the US.

Our old ways are being burned away, and we are being summoned to act on behalf of a new reality.

Will we answer? Will you answer?

The arts provide a metaphor for an open door we may locate to transcend our current, deadly— dead end.

I believe that artists are essential because they create worlds that did not previously exist.

A novelist, a painter, composer, playwright, architect, poet, vocalist, dancer creates a new reality, a new world, with their creative work.

If C.S. Lewis were here, he would say art is a supernatural process because art brings into existence something that does not exist in the natural world.

A new world appears! Begins to come into focus!

When it's *Harry Potter* or *Chronicles of Narnia* or *Picasso* or *Verdi*, this is more obvious.

Why, works of art in this very building—including the building itself—a **shout out to Sr. Lucio in Chicago—architect Erik Heitman**—represents a world that did not previously exist.

The other night we watched the Metropolitan Opera's *La Chenerentola*, starring Joyce DiDonato who is from the Kansas City area.

Old as that French fairy tale is, the opera company created a Cinderella story that did not previously exist.

And yet because people often don't know what to think about things that do not yet exist, art can be threatening, dangerous

People pull back from it, they become frightened.

As the artist Vermeer's brother told him when he couldn't sell any of his paintings, "People don't know what they need yet".

Some become hateful and mean in the face of a new world coming into existence.

(Pick up poster) This is a poster purchased for the set of my play "Stealing Kandinsky" last fall. The artist is the great German painter, Ernst Kirchner.

Fearing what they slandered as "Degenerate Art" The Nazis in Germany destroyed 600 of Kirchner's paintings in one year.

He sunk into despair and committed suicide.

We see today a mean backlash against a new world that is coming into existence.

I would say this new world has been coming into existence since our planet began to turn—turn—turn—from the 20th to the 21st century.

I once saw an exhibit of art that was created as the world turned from the 19th to the 20th century—entitled "Art at the Crossroads".

As we have turned from the 20th to the 21st century, we are *collectively* "***Souls at the Crossroads***".

We cannot waste any of our precious time on despair.

The worst turns the best to the brave!

We must persist in awakening! Creating!— a new world where people don't confront a pandemic without any health care to speak of.

Or a world where they don't have to go to work packed together in unsafe environments.

Or where large and small businesses, decades or a century old, cannot last 3 months because our economy is an antiquated artifact of inequality and consumerism and is in need of creative renewal.....(pause)

We seek a new world where you aren't killed for jogging while black like Armaund Arberry was.

Where you're not killed being home while black, as Breonna Taylor was in Louisville.

Where you don't receive the death penalty of being choked to death by police as George Floyd was for a petty crime because of anti-blackness that is pervasive in our culture.

It is a collective national and global agony to see and experience the powder keg which that spark has ignited.

It's an ugly face we see in the mirror.
We're hitting bottom after bottom after bottom.

We do not condone the looting, the violence, the destruction of property. It must come to an end so we can focus on the spark that ignited it, and the powder keg that is its explosive fuel.

Still, look again at that ugly face in the mirror! The looting and plundering of tax cuts for the rich, the destruction of land, waters and sky, including Native peoples lands, by self seeking corporations—and violence against immigrants and refugees.

It's an ugly looking image in the mirror, isn't it?

Still, if Jesus were here with us—and he is in Spirit on Pentecost—Jesus would tell us, as he told the disciples, “My hour has come.”

Let people of compassion, good will—and righteous indignation—it’s right to be angry over the way God’s children are mistreated and maligned—let them carry the spark of George Floyd’s murder—

And use that spark to light an explosion of creative national problem solving!

Inventive genius!

And the energy of a new generation of globally conscious people!

In order to transform a culture now besieged—by a persistent epidemic of physical disease in the form of Covid-19!

And an epidemic of social disease in the form of anti-blackness and a larger inequality that includes and transcends race and gender!

—Which we cannot and will not accept.....

Let us remember too that awakening is also personal in nature.

If a community is to awaken, it has to start with one person who awakens.

Before many people can know something, one person must know it!

You are the creative artist of your own life.

Whatever has happened to you in your life until now—When you awaken, you begin to create a life that did not previously exist.

Your own **new** life, which did not previously exist.

Jesus did not summon people to be better persons.

Jesus summoned people to become new persons!

What do you want from your life—really?

What makes you come alive?

Do that. Go deep with your own journey of inner action!

You must build the boat and sail with which you and only you can cross the ocean of life and land it on a farther shore.

As we turn to a close, I want to share a final thought on the Pentecost story.

Pentecost happened 50 days after Easter.

53 days after Jesus was murdered.

That's not even two months, and in my mind, all the people whom he healed in his three year ministry were on the scene!

All those he saved!—freed!—encouraged!—loved!—protected!—defended!—fed!—and forgave—they were all still around.

They hadn't gone anywhere, except maybe the disciples who surely went into hiding for a time.

But now, one by one, they have all come back out in the open.

Here they are!—at the Pentecost!

Look! There is the woman he met at the well!

Here is the woman who was going to be stoned!

The blind man by the side of the road!

Simon's mother in law who was dying with a fever.

The Gerasene demoniac!

Zaccheus climbed out of his tree!

The Roman centurion who was at the cross!

All the disciples! Mary Magdalene!

Simon of Cyrene who had helped Jesus carry his cross. (The Acts story even mentions someone from Cyrene, which was in north Africa.)

Joseph of Arimathea who had helped to bury Jesus.

The boy with the fishes and loaves whom Andrew had introduced to Jesus.

The owner who donated the holy donkey to the Palm Sunday parade!

Each one awakened!

Sent there by a holy wind!

Burned by a holy fire.

Creating an awakened community!

Which now includes you and me!

A Lion who was sleeping!

And is waking up!

Amen!

Rev Scott Myers

Pentecost Sunday, May 31, 2020

Westport Presbyterian Church

Each time you awaken in the morning, you encounter a new reality.

Each day, as people across the planet awaken, we encounter a new reality.

Or I need to focus on the things that are keeping me wounded so I can't be healed!

The habits of thought and action that are keeping me in chaos so I can't be made whole!

Or that are keeping me in bondage so I can't become free!

Or that are keeping me in sin, so I can't even imagine being forgiven by a loving God!

I can't even fathom that those things which I have crucified by stupidity in my own life might lead to my resurrection and my spiritual rebirth!

Thus, on this day of Pentecost—and in this season of Pentecost—our goal is—strangely enough—to get burned!

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The goal is, for each one of us—

Get my old ways burned away!

Get my egotism **burned away!!**

Get my neurotic agendas **burned away!**

Make myself entirely ready!—to let go of the negative habits of thinking that have been reflected in the happenings of my life.

There is a simple prayer we could all pray to activate this spiritual process:

“God make me entirely ready for the removal of my faults, that I may receive light on my problems and their true causes.”

On the other side of that kind of a prayer—prayed sincerely and persistently—I think you will find that you are becoming entirely ready for a mighty wind to blow into you!

You are becoming entirely ready for a mighty wind to blow through you!

You are becoming entirely ready for a mighty, rushing wind to blow away the burnt remains of your former life!— your former ways of thinking!—your former negative attitudes!—and difficult and destructive patterns!

And you will find yourself ready for healing!— even ready to become a healing presence for others.

I think that during his lifetime, Jesus **was** the Holy Spirit for the disciples.

Jesus was like a mighty wind that blew into their lives and before they realized it, Jesus had blown them in a whole new direction.

Jesus was the energy that completely surprised them by kindling love for God in them when that was the furthest thing from their minds.

But that's the way the Holy Spirit works!

It's a complete surprise!

It's God coming upon you or God coming up inside of you when you least expect it.