

# Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Dr. Andrew K. Barnett

Gospel Reading: John 20:19-23

The Feast of the Pentecost, May 31 2020

“God Sends!”



May I speak in the name of God. Amen.

Last week, I was on call for pastoral concerns, and I prayed with thirty-one families. I can tell you that our community – along with the nation – is nervous, and uncomfortable, and afraid.

If you're at Canterbury Court right now, you can't go to the dentist without taking a 14 day quarantine. You can't leave your room, and if your life-partner lives in the skilled nursing pavillion, you cannot see them.

If you work in a hospital, you risk your life to care for the sick.

If you're working a low wage job, you never could afford to stay home.

Maybe you work at the bank counter, or you deliver for Amazon, or you pick up other people's groceries, and you wonder if “essential worker” is really code for “expendable worker.”

If you're undocumented, you've always feared the trauma of ICE detention centers, but now they're critically dangerous.

If you live in jail, you are not safe.

If you live off your invested savings, you watch the stock market careen like a drunk man on a tire swing, and your life savings dangles in the balance.

If you work for a non-profit whose budget survives on philanthropy, you have serious questions about losing your job, and this is not a good time to find another one.

If you have black children – especially black sons – you fear for their lives every time they walk out the door.

If you have family and friends in nursing homes, you fear for their lives. You can't visit them, and if they get sick, you cannot be with them, even if they are dying.

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634 West Peachtree Street NW • Atlanta, Georgia 30308

Telephone 404-881-0835 • Facsimile 404-881-3796

[allsaintsatlanta.org](http://allsaintsatlanta.org)

There is a traumatic grief here – it literally and figuratively breaks the heart. And so yes, we are nervous, and uncomfortable, and afraid. And today, more than ever, we need Good News. Not Trite News. Not Fake News. Not Sunny Optimism. I’m talking about Gospel Good News.

Consider the Disciples in today’s Pentecost story. They had just pledged their lives and livelihoods to a revolutionary, Jewish, North-African refugee named Jesus. They watched him draw thousands to his rambunctious effort to subvert the empire. He said that God’s kingdom is rooted in unconditional love and he turned tables at the very seat of power. And that all sounded good at the time.

But surely they must have known, as he did, of the ongoing efforts to kill him. Then they watched the state murder him on a cross, then the stone rolled away, and an empty tomb proclaimed that love kills death. They ate and spoke with the resurrected Christ and then he was taken from them again – this time for good. I imagine that they were nervous, and confused, and afraid. Why else would they all be huddled together for fear on the feast of the Pentecost, trying to figure out what would come next.

Can I tell you that I believe we serve an on-time God, who has never abandoned us, and will never leave us. Can I tell you that I believe we serve a God of possibility, who makes a way out of no way. Can I tell you that I believe we serve a God of community, who empowers us to love for the sake of the world.

How does God do this? Through the agency, the movement, the activity, of the Holy Spirit. This Holy Spirit is not timid, and she is not afraid. She doesn’t show up as a polite breeze, nor as a pilot light. But rather as a rush of violent wind,” as “divided tongues of fire” she gives them each abilities to speak God’s truth in their own context, and Peter reminds us of the prophet’s promise:

I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,  
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
and your young shall see visions,  
and your old shall dream dreams.

Indeed, this Pentecost, we proclaim the love of a Triune God, for the sake of the world. And one of the central things to know about Trinity is that God sends. God sends forth the act of creation in a primal blur. God so loves the world that he sends his only Son, Jesus sends the Holy Spirit, the activity of God in our midst. The Holy Spirit builds and sends God's church, and God's church sends us: you and me into the troubled waters where the kingdom is not. It is precisely there, in these waters, that God calls us to build the kingdom of Shalom, which is a just peace for all of God's children.

Friend's, this is the Apostolic mission of God. And the world is hurting! Like a lightning flash in the night COVID-19 has exposed the failures of our system. If poverty created health risks before, now the poor are more likely to die from this disease. If Democracy was shaky before, now you worry for the republic. Indeed, the pandemic of racism has never had a vaccine.

Ahmaud Arbery was hunted in broad daylight, like an animal. And then the nation watched George Floyd suffocate under a cop's knee in Minneapolis, and as I speak to you, my home town is on fire. These are nothing other than assaults on our common humanity. And even if others will not, we must name the roots of this bigotry with precision – white supremacy, racism, structural injustice –all contrary to God's dream for the world. To turn away from this truth, or to blur it, is complicity. And that is how culture produces evil.

In a time like this, we dare not forget the words of Deitrich Bonhoeffer, who knew: "Silence in the face of evil is itself evil... not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act." Indeed, the ship called humanity sails into a familiar storm. Once gain the wind howls against us. Waves batter our boat. Once again, racist torches march in our streets, newly empowered. Black and brown bodies fall, We are confused, and nervous, and afraid. And we should ask, "With what peace will Jesus calm this storm?" Is it a papered over truce, where we equivocate for a time then move on, awaiting the next tragedy?

Can people of conscience continue to turn away? Or does Christ calm the storm with God's peace? Where justice flows down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. Where, in Dr. King's words, "True peace is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of justice." Friends, this justice is precisely the peace with which Christ calms our storms, and I believe we are called to a similar journey. But we're going to need at least a little faith – we're going to have to trust the Holy Spirit.

As pastor Ernest Campbell writes, "The reason that we seem to lack faith in in our time is that we are not doing anything that requires it." So I don't know what God is calling you to do right now. I know that in the black community, there is a real reticence to hear one more speech from a white person when the pain is so real, the inequality so stark. These conversations on race are full of pitfalls, and centuries of pain. But James Baldwin gets it right, "Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced."

So what is to be done? We can learn something from our history. All Saints' showed this city how to love during the AIDS' crisis. This church held funerals – sometimes 2 and 3 a week – for those who couldn't pay, for those who had nowhere else to turn. Especially in the gay community, survivors will tell you that all of their friends died. Famously, this congregation drew close to those who were dying of AIDS. At one point even crawling into a hospital bed with a man who was dying alone. This church said they said we don't care what anyone says you are a child of God and we love you, and you are not going to die alone.

Now we can't do that with COVID-19, because it's not safe. But we can with respect to racism and white supremacy. We can draw close to those who are suffering, we can stand up and demand justice, we can listen with open hearts to the cry of the unheard. When we orient ourselves towards God's love, which is not a sentiment, but rather a stance: we love God, love neighbor, and literally change the world.

I think what I'm trying to say is that we're all in this together, and God calls us to a different way of being. Let me try to put it this way, in a story. A lot of people are comparing this pandemic to a marathon. I want to tell you a story about running the Philadelphia marathon. There are a lot of people cheering for you- signs everywhere. Some are funny, some are sweet, some are just weird. After several hours of positivity, I drew special laughs from a man in a racoon-skin cap, and a burlap sack dubbed the sarcastic encourager who slowly banged a spoon on an old pan saying, "You have no chance. All hope is lost. Give up now. I'd turn back if I were you." And we all laughed, and appreciated his originality, sang the rocky theme song and kept running.

But then about mile 19, where you start to question your life choices. Like, why did I pay for this? Everything hurts. Why? I thought seriously about giving up. And just then, I ran past a giant tent with great music pumping and those vuvuzelas from the South African world cup and people dressed up in goofy costumes, and a total stranger saw me riding the metaphorical struggle bus, he stepped into the road and he looked me in the eye and he said, "I don't know you. And you don't know me. But I KNOW you can do this. You can do this. Take your next step. Take your next breath. Keep going."

I SO needed to hear that. Take your next step. Take your next breath. Do the next right thing.

And of course George Floyd and Eric Garner couldn't take their next breath. But we should. And every single breath we take will thus be seen as an act of defiance to a death-dealing system a pledge of allegiance to God's Kingdom where we hear the message of Pentecost: That we are NOT doing this alone. God knows us and loves us God sends the Holy Spirit to lead and guide, to empower and support, and because we have each other, by the grace of God, we will keep on keeping on.

Nobody knows how this race will be run, but I truly believe that when we prioritize the good of the whole, when we orient ourselves toward God's love for us, and for the world, when we tune in to the energy of the Holy Spirit in our lives, that we will get through this. By God's grace, we will find the strength to take one more step.

One more breath. Together. For the sake of the world.

Amen.

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