

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on May 23, 2021 (Pentecost, Year B)

So *this* is what it feels like to preach to something other than the little green light on my laptop. Frankly, I'd kind of forgotten what it's like to preach to actual people. And after 62 straight Sundays of wondering, "Is this thing even on?" it is a good and joyful thing to see some, if not *smiling* faces because of the masks, at least some eyeballs and the tops of a few heads. Welcome back.

I actually love that our very first hybrid service — with some of you worshiping in physical pews and some in virtual ones — is on Pentecost. And not just because Dan Fickes is always talking about how much the red vestments "pop" on camera. Get a good look because we won't be seeing them again until Palm Sunday 2022. Sorry, Dan.

But as we gather in a new way, this feels like the perfect day to welcome and celebrate the Holy Spirit in our midst. Because if there was ever a moment in the church year that invites change, that makes all things new, that undermines the familiar "way we've always done it" refrain that we so often cling to, it is Pentecost. Like a violent wind, the Spirit blows where it will, taking our preconceived notions right along with it. The Holy Spirit blows through the familiar and the cherished, knocking down sacred cows and yanking us out of our comfort zones. The Holy Spirit breaks open the vessel of both the church and our lives, and invites us into new perspectives and new ways of being. Which is at the same time both terrifying and life-giving.

But this all feels right today. Because a new thing is happening in our midst. We are reemerging from the ashes of a pandemic that has seen untold grief, that has disproportionately impacted the most vulnerable populations, that has shifted priorities in nearly every aspect of our lives, that has made us question how we work and play and pray. And we can't just pretend it never happened. We can't fling off our masks — metaphorically speaking — and ignore the lessons we've learned, and the ways in which our lives have been turned upside down and inside out. We can't disregard the physical and emotional trauma of the past 15 months.

Fortunately, the Holy Spirit doesn't just blow through like a tornado and leave us to pick up the pieces. The good news in all of this swirling newness, is that when Jesus bids farewell to the disciples, he promises them and us, "I will not leave you comfortless." Pentecost is the fulfillment of this promise. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus remains with and among us. There's a reason another name for the Holy Spirit is the Holy Comforter. Amid all the upheaval of our lives, we are comforted by the continuous, ongoing, eternal presence of the Holy Spirit in our midst.

So the Spirit both breaks open and heals, the Spirit simultaneously uproots us and grounds us. And at first glance these conflicting emotions feel at odds with one another. How can you possibly feel at the same time sheltered and exposed? But then you realize that this paradox stands at the very heart of the Christian faith, a faith that holds together both life and death, cross and resurrection. And you start to see the emerging pattern of the life of faith. Being simultaneously disrupted and grounded is not an oxymoron so much as the way of the cross.

And through the lens of the cross we begin to understand and make sense of this wild story from the Acts of the Apostles that describes the arrival of the Holy Spirit. The divided tongues as of fire that descended upon the disciples, the sudden ability to speak in other languages, the understanding among and between those of every family, language, people, and nation. It's no wonder the bystanders were convinced the disciples had been doing a little day drinking. But what emerges is this wonderful and sacred mystery that is the Church. This very human institution that has done both great good and great harm over the years. But a movement that, when it remains faithful to the words and actions of Jesus, continues to transform our lives and make a difference in the world.

Ultimately, the coming of the Holy Spirit transforms us from people who passively follow Jesus into a faithful community of disciples poised to act in his name. And that's why God calls us not just to *go* to church but to *be* the church — which is a good thing, considering we literally haven't been able to go to church for the past 434 days. But this is a lesson I hope we never forget. That we are not passive observers of holy things at a particular time in a particular place on a particular day, but active participants in Christ's work of peace and salvation — no matter where we are and where we go and however we worship.

This morning, I'm also heartened by the question posed through the prophet Ezekiel. "Can these bones live?" I think everyone involved with church — this church or any other church — has asked this very question over the past year and three months. "Can these bones live?" Can these bones which make up the very foundation of the church, live? Can these bones which define and give shape to the church, live? Will the church as we know it survive months and months of empty pews — we had to literally clean out the cobwebs this week. Will it survive not just financially but spiritually? Will people actually come back?

These bones will live, all right. They may live in some new ways, some challenging ways, some exciting ways, some unfamiliar ways. But they won't live because of anything we do or fail to do. They will live because the Holy Spirit breathes life into them and animates them even as they take on new shapes and forms. And the Holy Spirit, the Holy Comforter, will ground us and

shelter us even as God does a new thing in our midst, even as we are worshiping together in new ways. Our regathering efforts may at times look and sound and feel like the rattling of bones coming together, bone upon bone.

But I have rarely been so hopeful about St. John's as I am right now. We have done some incredible ministry together throughout this time. And as we begin to regather and get our liturgical sea legs back, I am filled with joy and expectation — and I hope you are as well. I hope you can feel it in your very bones. Let's hold on to the spirit of creativity and innovation and deep concern for one another that has marked this time of being together even while physically apart. The Holy Spirit has moved deeply among us. Our challenge and charge is to remain open to the Spirit in the days, months, and years ahead. And we will do this together, with God's help.