

Rev. Linda Johnson Seyenkulo
Sermon for Pentecost
Sunday, May 31, 2020

God's Grace, Mercy and Peace to you on this Pentecost Sunday. Today I preach to you in Beavertown, Pennsylvania, USA, North America from my home in Monrovia, Liberia, West Africa. On this Pentecost Sunday I give thanks for technology and for the way the Holy Spirit continues to inspire and energize us; drawing us closer together in ways we never even thought of just a few months ago!

Let me introduce myself. I am Rev. Linda Johnson Seyenkulo, ELCA pastor and missionary to Liberia, West Africa, where I teach pastors and lay leaders of the Lutheran Church in Liberia and serve as curriculum developer for the Lay Leaders and Ministers Training Center. I also serve as Associate Pastor at St. Andrew's Lutheran Church, Monrovia. And, I'm honored to hold the title Mother (or Reverend Mother) because I am married to the Presiding Bishop of the Lutheran Church in Liberia (he is to the Lutheran Church in Liberia as Bishop Eaton is to the ELCA.) It is great to be here today because the Upper Susquehanna Synod of which you are a part is the ELCA Companion Synod of the Lutheran Church in Liberia. Thanks Pastor Jim for the invitation to preach!

In the preaching tradition of Liberia, I come to you today with the sermon theme "Overcome by the Holy Spirit."

Let us pray.

Come Holy Spirit, Come. Amen.

It is Pentecost Sunday! We celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit—the baptism of the Holy Spirit on the Christian church—the start of the good news of Jesus Christ being shared with the world.

On that long-ago Pentecost Day in Jerusalem there were two gatherings going on: The Shavuot a huge festival celebrating God giving the Torah to the people of Israel—and a smaller, intense gathering of about 120 of the followers of Jesus who were gathered together in a locked room. I found myself feeling wistful as I read the story from the book of Acts. Wistful because they are gathering. We are not gathering in Liberia right now—in fact we are in a state of emergency to make sure people stay healthy and safe. I'm sure in Beaverton, you too are finding life has slowed down—is very different from the norm.

While there were large crowds on the streets of Jerusalem, in an Upper Room in a house near the temple. The followers of Jesus were gathered in a locked room—they were scared. There were about 120 of them, men and women. They were Jesus followers. They were people who had watched Jesus die on the cross through orders of the Roman Empire. They knew what the soldiers of that empire could do so they locked themselves in a room. They were scared.

I know about being scared. It is not fun; it paralyzes me. I bet you know about being scared too.

We may feel that we are in kind of a locked room during this shelter in place time. All over the world—we are not out celebrating, are we? People are upset about wearing masks, about keeping 6 feet social distance. But we hear about what happens when people don't follow guidelines. So while we may not be locked in, we are certainly trying to stay in place—to stay safe. This time is scary. A virus that no one seems to understand—scary. And so under everything going on in our lives, we are scared.

The news from Minnesota this week that makes me scared—George Floyd, a black man, dying at the knee of a white police officer in Minnesota—it makes me scared—scared and angry. There is parallel between the story of the disciples being locked up for fear of the Roman Empire and its soldiers and our story in Minnesota. So I want to take my biracial son—my son who identifies as African American, and Lutheran, I might add—and his

friends and lock them up in a room to be safe. I want to do the same thing with our two daughters. You see the disciples were powerless Jews who were connected with Jesus who died on that cross. My son and his friends are black men who are seen by most of my white brothers and sisters, some of them my friends and family—and even by the police, as threatening, as someone to be feared, as someone who can be hurt, killed and almost all the time no one is held accountable.

With Covid-19—and the death of George Floyd in Minnesota, I feel scared—I get why those disciples—not just the 11 but them and about 109 of their friends were gathered in that room and why they were terrified! On that Pentecost Day, the followers of Jesus gathered in a room with a locked door because they were scared, of what the Empire with help from the Jewish religious authorities would do to them. They had seen Jesus die.

I understand their fear. Covid-19 and the things done to black people in the U.S. makes me want to lock myself and everyone I love in a room until it goes away and we can be safe. My Human spirit wants to stay safe and silent.

But on that first Pentecost Sunday so long ago—God had a different idea. No staying locked up in a room for fear of the Empire and the Jewish religious authorities for those Jesus followers. God sent the Holy Spirit—to change things up—to empower the people of God—In the Gospel reading, Jesus gives his locked up, frozen-in-fear followers a mandate to have the power to go and care for God’s people—Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit on them and gives them power. And then—on Pentecost—the Holy Spirit comes and fills them. A very old book, *The People’s New Testament*, written in the late 1800s, describes it this way: “They were all filled with the Holy Spirit. All the disciples present. To be filled implies that the human spirit within was overwhelmed by, or immersed in, the Holy Spirit. The baptism of the Spirit was not a sprinkling, but an outpouring that overwhelmed the human spirit.”

Did you hear that, people of God? The Holy Spirit came to a group of human beings and took over (overwhelmed) their human spirits. Their fear left.

I want to be overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit not by fear, don’t you?

The Holy Spirit was amazing: Tongues of fire appeared above their heads. The Jesus followers, many of them uneducated, started to speak in languages they did not know. People who were different from them heard the good news of Jesus Christ, and the message of love, peace, and healing in their own languages.

Peter left the locked room went out to the street where the soldiers of the Empire marched—to preach. Peter—quick to speak and act, often wrongly—Peter who wanted to be safe and maybe go fishing once in a while—Peter preached the Good News of Jesus Christ. He preached to people who were different so many ways. Overcome by the Spirit he did more than he ever would have thought possible.

It wasn’t just Peter that was changed: those people who came to Jerusalem to celebrate receiving the Torah(the law) from God—they heard about Jesus who came to fulfill the law!

The 119 people in that room? They were changed too. Their human spirits were overcome by the Holy Spirit, fear went away. They shared the Good News of Jesus with the whole world. I live in hope so I believe that they did not just preach but they loved others as fully human—overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit they told what Jesus had done to change the world.

So, what does this mean for us? You in Beavertown, Pennsylvania, USA, North America and me in Monrovia, Liberia, West Africa? Remember “it is our job on this Pentecost Sunday to open ourselves to be “overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit.” To let the Holy Spirit take away our fear.

When it comes to the Coronavirus, realize that it is fear that makes us not want to change our routines, wear masks, change things in our lives (including worship). It is fear that makes us talk about rights like “it is my right to: “not wear a mask”, “go where I want to go when I want to go”. Realize that it is fear that makes us not

want to listen to medical experts, who can't tell us exactly when this will be over. I want to know, don't you? Face the fear—and then keep taking deep breaths, deep Holy Spirit filled breaths at appropriate social distance from others. Invite the Holy Spirit to overwhelm you.

When it comes to our work as the people of God in this time where yet another black life, where George Floyd was killed by those who work for us, who work for, if you will, the Empire—realize that fear is under our grief, our anger, our distancing ourselves from the situation, our denial.

If you are a person of African Descent: You know God loves you—God also loves your anger, your grief, your exhaustion—and the Spirit of God is with you. May you find the support you need and may justice prevail.

If you are a white person like me, know it is fear: explaining away what happened, blaming the victim, getting affirmation from people of color. Face the fear and know you are a part of a system where such things happen too often. Invite the Holy Spirit to overwhelm you: Let the Holy Spirit let you be outraged that this system represents you, learn how institutional racism works. Learn what you can do to facilitate Holy Spirit change. Talk to Pastor Jim to find resources—or I'm glad to be in touch with you. Pastor Jim has my contact information.

It is Pentecost Sunday—Holy Spirit time for us to be overwhelmed. Breathe deeply, brothers and sisters, breathe in the Holy Spirit—let the Spirit lead you—lead you to action, lead you to wanting to learn and understand, lead you to genuine solidarity with others, lead you to work for peace and justice for all of God's people.

Pray with me—Come Holy Spirit—Come! and let the People of God worshipping in their Holy Spirit filled places say amen. Amen.