

THE CHAOS OF A PENTECOST BIRTH

Day of Pentecost

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One day in December of 1987, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine was packed. Not because it was Christmas...Christmas would come later. People packed that huge building that winter's day to honor and to mourn the loss of James Baldwin—a child of New York who had become a resident of France and a voice of this country. James Baldwin was a clear-sighted and gentle man who saw our country—including its faults—and yet still loved us.

So today, in the wake of fire in Minneapolis and demonstrations across the U.S., I want to read you something from a letter Baldwin wrote to his nephew in 1963. He wrote it partly to explain why the boy's father, Baldwin's brother, was a damaged and broken man.

I know what the world has done to my brother and how narrowly he has survived it. And I know, which is much worse, and this is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it. One can be, indeed one must strive to become, tough and philosophical concerning destruction and death, for this is what most of humankind has been best at since we have heard of humans. But it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime.

I know that today on this feast of Pentecost 2020, we stand not just in the midst of a dangerous physical illness but also in the midst of spiritual illness. Once again, our police/my police have taken the life of another black man. Last week, a man named George Floyd died while in the process of being arrested. The fact that he may have passed a counterfeit \$20 bill is irrelevant—he DIED. No second chance for him. Our police—my police—knelt on his neck till he died.

And now I, as a citizen, have a choice. I can wring my hands and say, “oh... police brutality...what am I to do?” Or maybe it is time for me to “man up” and say I have benefitted from this country's inequity. I went to college. I have a house—no two...make that three. I have had second chances when I messed up. And medical care? Well, let's not go there...I have it.

I did not kill George Floyd but my prosperity and his death are somehow related. **AND THE POLICE ARE NOT THE PROBLEM.** They are a symptom. They work for me and for a system which favors me. And it makes me afraid to say that, because, frankly, this issue makes me feel overwhelmed. But I know that in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles today, there is fire and wind and noise. We may call Pentecost the “birthday of the church” but it was not a gentle and serene birth. It was like all human birth: messy, chaotic, and confusing. And its description resonates with what I feel today.

In the reading from Acts, we hear a description of that one event and what it signifies:

In those days I will pour out my Spirit; and your men shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.' ”

It is daunting. But when we hear this, let us hang on to the end where it says “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” That was true then and it is true now. We cannot do this alone

but we must do it. We must claim our privilege or the hurt and call out to have the help of God, not in order to ask God to grant our wishes but so that God might open our eyes to His.

So let's pray. Look wider and deeper when we go to vote. Accept responsibility for our privilege, claim the cost of our pain, and move together toward the kingdom of God, not in the great by and by but here on earth.

And may the soul of George Floyd and all the departed through the mercy of God rest in peace.

Amen.