

## WHERE IT COMES FROM

Texts on Pentecost Sunday, 2012

*Acts 2: 1-21; Ezekiel 37: 1-14*

Does history matter? You might think the answer to this question obvious—yes, yes, of course!—and yet feel that the answer is hardly relevant to your personal life. The fact is that down through our thousands of years together, most humans most of the time have looked at the world through lenses which set history off in a vague distant field. We have endured war and slavery, hard times, prison, famine, drought, and disease, in the main, much as a dog endures pain the same, regardless whether an illness, an earthquake, or an evil master inflict it.

Think of agricultural societies. Their religions turn on the cycles of the seasons. There is no history. Things aren't going anywhere. If your sons and daughters were carried off by invaders last year, the evil must be borne, for invaders have always raped and pillaged. It is their job. Yours is to pray to the corn god during the festival of the sun's return. The great religions of the East scale human time inside immense epochs of recurrence called *kolpas*. Against them, history does not matter at all. Indeed, one of religion's ancient tasks has been to keep people from despair over the griefs they bear at the hands of the few who actually do make history rain boulders of consequence down upon them.

Jews and Christians have not always embraced the possibility of history. Pentecost, like nearly all the holy days, was an annual harvest ritual. Early on, the church mapped Christmas to the cycle of the sun, and Easter was always linked to the moons. Without doubt, millions of Christians still move from Christmas to Christmas, pondering their dreams and griefs in the circuit of the sun, not the Son. History for so many is but TV noise in the background. A little couplet by Samuel Johnson virtually commends indifference to history: *How small, of all that human hearts endure / That part which laws or kings can cause or cure*. In 1970, the singer Joni Mitchell enchanted my generation with a song called *The Circle Game*. Did we feel drawn by its lullaby to let go of the hard work and unfinished hopes of the 1960s, when history had finally begun to matter for many?

And the seasons they go round and round / And the painted ponies go up and down  
We're captive on the carousel of time

We can't return, we can only look / Behind from where we came

And go round and round and round / In the circle game.

Does history matter? Does your answer?

Pentecost, as we have said, was once a harvest ritual rooted in a religion of recurrence. The way we Christians practice Pentecost now may work no differently. If we call it an annual feast of the birthday of the Church, and we enjoy the festive colors and familiar songs and themes, perhaps Pentecost is still performing the pain-killing function of religion, taking our minds off the terror of history by chopping time and its evils into little blocks we can bear.

But what about that Pentecost from the stories of Acts? Whatever it was that actually happened in Jerusalem that year, Peter and the disciples took it as a total interruption of the endless cycle of the seasons. Something new under the sun was taking place. “These are the last days prophesied by Joel,” he declared. And then, from the great depths of Judaism’s hope for real history; from a wisdom like that you learned with Job, the apostle sang of a breakthrough in time, when freedom comes upon all people to see and to say what God is doing. No more are we to be bound like beasts of burden to their chores, but young and old, man and woman, son and daughter, slave and free—all are showing up with the freedom to speak. Speak what? That the Lord’s great and glorious day has come! That history is soon to be over and done with, and evil put down for ever, and only the good shall live on.

Ah, religion! How you do swing from pole to pole, absolving believers of responsibility for their time on earth, for history. Either it is the endless cycle going round and round, or it is kingdom come and end of days—but either way, the hard time is always almost over, and no one has to face it, or take responsibility to change it. But then something else happened. In history.

Jesus did not come back. The absent God stayed absent. By the time Luke wrote down the story of Peter’s Pentecost, sixty years of waiting for “that great and glorious day” had worn thin. The church had to begin to grapple with a strange reality: To be sure, everything had changed. The law and its bondage were broken. Every man and woman who chose to could see that in Christ they were free and responsible and forgiven; that birth and station had nothing to do with God’s salvation or God’s will on earth. All that had changed—but now, the easy ending was withdrawn. Jesus as Terminator would not come and settle scores. History that matters had to emerge. The Incarnation of Christ was dawning in a wholly new message, that God has given to humans all the power and the possibility of doing a new thing.

A little word barely audible in Peter’s Pentecost speech shows real history breaking through. In v. 14, Peter raises his voice to the crowd, saying, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem . . .,” and continues with the stirring words from the prophet Joel. But in the very next verse (22)—we did not hear it today—Peter says, “Men of Israel, listen to these words . . .”

Now, some of you will remember that when Peter spoke, there was no Israel. Israel had been wiped from the earth by an invading empire over 700 years earlier! In much of the Hebrew Bible, the name “Israel” refers not to a country, but to a dream deferred; to the possibility of reunion with the ten lost tribes scattered anciently on the winds of time. In Peter’s time, only those descended from the tribe of Judah remained, the people we call Jews. Judah is the little land where Jerusalem is. So when Peter calls to the assembled businessmen returned from far lands for the seasonal festival and says “Men of Israel . . .” he is calling on their dream that history matter. That the evils of empire be overcome. That all twelve tribes be gathered as one once more in

freedom and in justice, just as they, the twelve the disciples of Jesus, were now gathered in one Body as a sign to call all people home to God.

And look to Ezekiel. Look to that glorious prophecy of a new spirit blowing into the dry bones. It was to the people of Judah in exile that Ezekiel sang—but in his dream, the dry bones brought to life belong to ancient vanished invisible Israel. Just as his prophecy ends, in the very next verse—we did not hear it today—Ezekiel speaks for the Lord: ‘Mortal, take a stick and write on it, “For Judah. . . .’ Then take another stick and write on it, ‘For Israel . . . .’ And join them together into one stick, so that they may become one in your hand.” See! You cannot understand the Bible; you cannot get where Jesus and the Jews are coming from; until you feel the desire in this people that a new thing break forth; that we overcome evil; that we bring all the scattered children of God home in the city of healing; in a word, that history matter.

We haven’t time to tell the whole story, how history came to matter. The short version is that not until well after the Protestant Reformation had torn down the monolith of the Church did the hope of freedom begin to rise as the hope that history should matter, and that humanity should be heading somewhere to help set God’s will on earth as it is in heaven. In our own time, it has become possible to understand how difficult it has always been for us humans to awake and take our crown, as we once put it here; to accept God’s gift of freedom and our responsibility to act together to bring home the least and the lost. Today we can see Pentecost not so much as *when* the church was born but as the image for *how* the church is *reborn*, when enough of its people see the tragedies of history by which people have been shattered and scattered like dry bones in a valley, and call on the Spirit for courage to act.

Do you wonder where such Spirit comes from? I’ll tell you where it comes from. My earth science teacher loved to intone a little law about the weather: *The wind doth blow from high to low*. In other words, the wind is not sent; it is drawn—by a vacuum, by a low pressure system, by an emptiness. The wind comes from the call for it. It is the same with the Spirit. I’ll tell you where it comes from. It comes from the need for it. “Even you know what to give your children,” Jesus says. “How much more will the Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask!” You must understand, Ezekiel was asking and Peter and the Pentecost apostles were praying for the union, reunion, communion of all on this devilishly divided earth of power and politics. And the Spirit came. Indeed it only comes when people at need form a kind of low pressure system from a deep yearning not for themselves but for union with them who are broken off. Only then does the Spirit blow from high to low. Without that, why should Spirit even move? If the Spirit went where it is not wanted, it would be a waste of breath. As much as a blessing, then, Pentecost is a warning that only the hungry hope to be caught up into history that matters can bring new life to the beloved community; a hope so pure and free of the burdens of the past and of wishing after the way church once was, that when it comes, wherever it comes from, the future of God comes with it.

Now fasten your seatbelt. Here comes a hard left turn. History matters. And America is in the valley of shadows. Last Monday morning, about fifty church leaders, mostly clergy, gathered from across the city at a Bronx church to talk about President Obama's affirmation of marriage equality for same-sex couples. The conveners hoped we would think together about strategies to assure that this next election result in help and healing for the mostly African-American communities we serve—in a word, that it result in some decent history! For it is up to us to be heading somewhere on earth, as it is in heaven—no more mere enduring power and property piling up for a few, empire without end.

But the conversation last Monday did not go in that direction. For most of the preachers there, their thought went straight to five or six verses of the Bible that condemn sex acts between men. Most in that room are hot angry with the President for his word of welcome to gay and lesbian citizens. Some want to vote against him. Others want to sit it out. All of them want to slam it down over and again that *God's word is clear. God's word never changes!* And there it was! The old-time religion, standing fast against history that matters, against the Spirit calling all the scattered children home. Some of us sent a different word into that tide of anger, but words won't work on hardened hearts.

More in my bones and sinews than in my head did I feel that morning what the Riverside Church is, here in this city and far beyond: a refuge for many who would elsewhere find no shelter in the Spirit. Naturally, the other churches think we have preferred our own urges and abandoned the Word of God. Do not be swayed by their calumnies. Affirm rather the deepest meaning of God's word, held in these scriptures: that history shall matter and we must be headed where God's will is yet to be set on earth as it is in heaven.

Once you know in your body and soul where it comes from—how Spirit comes when you call at need, and moves you in grace and power to speak what is true, so that “even upon my slaves, both men and women, I pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy”—then you know why God has pulled up from this earth and has withdrawn the absolute divine presence and control from the earth, just as Jesus promised. It is so that Spirit might come, from high to low, and give you wisdom to see and to say and to begin to act as one to make all one, on earth as it is in heaven. There are no safe stations for the cautious. There is no plain truth and no single law of God to stand on in the overwhelming tide. No mere facts direct us. The empty tomb proves nothing. Only this: when you are at your lowest low, the gift of God comes from on high to give you confidence to draw the divine breath and stand up and shout the communion and fellowship of the Holy Spirit, and make history matter again.