

*Easter 5, Life after death – the counter narrative of life powered by God the Holy Spirit<sup>1</sup>*  
*Acts 2:37-47*

“What shall we do?” This is the question the crowd listening to Peter asks. They were “cut to the heart” by his words and in response they ask, “What shall we do?”

Earlier, when the Spirit descended in flames of language, the question they asked was, “What does this mean?” In her storytelling several weeks ago, Sylvie re-presented for us the profoundness and complexity of that question. The question that begins this morning’s story is equally profound and complex. “What shall we do?” We hear all the possibility and emotion in it—the eagerness, the frustration, the readiness, the defiance.

Peter, surrounded by the other 11 apostles, is speaking to their fellow Jews. This is an “in” crowd. They belong to each other. They share a history—common ancestors, common stories, a common God, a common religious practice, common faithfulness. They held these things in common.

So when Peter and these other Galilean nobodies start talking about Jesus, and putting Jesus into the middle of all the things they held in common, their question, “What are we do do?!” is a logical question to ask. We know from our own experiences that when someone comes with something new that completely re-interprets what we’ve always understood, we know that the message is heard by some as Good News. And by others as suspicious news. And for others, anything in between.

One of the reasons that Peter’s message is hard to hear is that the subtext of his words is, “We’ve been wrong. We thought we knew, but we didn’t know.” At one level, we just don’t like to hear we’ve been wrong. Especially when our whole worldview has been built around what we’ve believed to be right. At another level it’s hard to hear because of the

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<sup>1</sup> *Much* credit for inspiration and content goes to Willie James Jennings and his *Acts Commentary*.

audacity and incredibility of Peter's words. What makes Peter a credible witness? Why should this gathering believe these 12 Galileans? Why would *anyone* believe this counter narrative they are telling?

But they did believe. Three thousand were so moved by Peter that they passed through the waters and joined the revolution.

That 3,000 were baptized is a powerful testimony to the aliveness and love and power of the Holy Spirit. There is no logic that would have 3,000 people trusting the words and witness of 12 unknown Galileans. Except for the logic of love. Resurrection love. Giving and forgiving love. Merciful, steadfast, and gracious love. The gathering knew their Scripture and they recognized that the love they were witnessing was the love of the One God, the Living God that was written into their sacred Scrolls.

*The counter narrative of life powered by God the Holy Spirit* is a counter narrative based on the logic of love. Love that is the common language that God the Holy Spirit is blowing and breathing in the world. And from this story we can be sure that the language of Peter and the apostles, the words they spoke as well as their body language, we can be sure that it was love—powerful love, tangible love, gratuitous and palpable love. It is because Peter and the other apostles were covered and filled with God the Holy Spirit that 3,000 believed. His spoken words would have been easy to argue with. But there was no arguing against the powerful word of love that they embodied and the crowd witnessed.

The love of God the Holy Spirit is a compelling love. It is the love that we see in Jesus, a concrete and bodied love. A love that challenges the systems and structures of our relationships with others. A love that releases our desire for power and chooses the role of service, of washing others' feet. A love that sits at the table, with Judas. This is the love that

the crowd saw in Peter and the apostles. Powered by the Holy Spirit, they were able to love as Jesus had loved.<sup>2</sup>

And it is a hard love. As in, it isn't easy. To love as Jesus loved can be painful, humbling, defeating. Which is why God the Holy Spirit *gives* us the language of love. It is not a language that we can buy or learn or master on our own—it is given as *gift*.

Those listening to Peter were convinced by the love of the Spirit they were witnessing. Otherwise they never would have chosen to receive his words. When they ask, “What shall we do?” Peter answers, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

“Repent.” Peter doesn't sugarcoat his message or try to make it sound easy. Repentance means they...*we* will be completely turned around, our worldview completely altered. In repentance, we hear the incredible counter narrative of the One God, the Living God, a narrative of love. To repent is to give ourselves to a life powered by God the Holy Spirit.

And Peter's call for repentance is specific. He's asking them to let their history be re-written by the language of the Holy Spirit. To a people who had been formed by the deliverance stories of the killing of firstborns and the crossing of the Red Sea, the love of the Holy Spirit offers a revolutionary story of deliverance, of salvation. Deliverance, Peter says, comes from passing through the body of Jesus. Salvation comes from being baptized into Jesus' body.<sup>3</sup>

This baptism isn't a simple *formula* to use and follow; this baptism is *formation*.<sup>4</sup> This baptism forms us and transforms us into the Body of Christ. This baptism takes us to the

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<sup>2</sup> From Lina Thompson's *Street Psalm* blog on May 17, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> This is Willie James Jennings.

<sup>4</sup> Jennings again.

cross, into the tomb, and through to the other side into the Resurrection Garden and new life breathed into us by God the Holy Spirit.

This is a radical and revolutionary baptism that Peter, powered by the Holy Spirit, is offering. And while he's offering it to a specifically Jewish crowd, we can be sure that his words are for us as well. We may "know" with the logic of our intellect or by the logic of empire that salvation comes from being baptized in Jesus' name. But I dare say that for many of us, this baptism is more about following a particular formula that it is about repentance and formation.

The Hebrew Bible tells a story of God's deliverance. And it begins with God killing the firstborn sons of the oppressor. But the firstborn sons of God's people are saved because they put sacrificial blood on their doors. And then they flee, passing through the waters that have parted for them, safely reaching the other side while the waters close and kill their pursuers.

This story, and variations of this story, has been forming ancient peoples through the ages. And it continues to shape us. It is the story of nationalism and empire, and the god of empire. The stories of empire assume a god who is *for* a particular people and *against* those who harm "his" people. In the deliverance stories of empire, god approves and sanctions the killing of national enemies. This god defends particular nations and that nation's interests. It is a belief in this god that has our country at war for decades, and threatening another war.

But Peter calls us to repent, to let the Holy Spirit's love transform our understanding. Repent and be baptized in Jesus, Peter tells the crowd, tells us. "Pass through Jesus," he invites. There is no killing of another. There are no sacrifices or blood offerings. There isn't passing through water that saves one body and destroys another. There is only passing

through the body of Jesus—the body of a servant, the body of a friend, the body of the one who was executed, the body of the alive one in the Resurrection Garden, the ascended body.

“Repent and be baptized in Jesus. Repent and pass through Jesus.” This is a revolutionary understanding of who God is and how God has been at work in the world from the beginning. A God who loves the world so much that God is willing to die. A God who chooses execution rather than killing the oppressor. A God whose response to human beings, again and again, is love, bodied love, embodied presence.

This is the revolution. It was revolutionary 2,000 years ago and it is revolutionary today. To repent and pass through the body of Jesus—the lynched, resurrected, and ascended body of Jesus—is possible only with the gift of God the Holy Spirit. It is this love that is building the Reign of Christ in the world.

And it is only when we have passed through the body of Jesus and come through to the other side, that we are able to love as Jesus loved. Powered by the Holy Spirit, we are formed and transformed with the capacity to love as Jesus loved—in the wildernesses of our lives, around tables with sinners, with enemies, confronting oppression and injustice, touching and serving each other and all bodies.

When we have passed through the body of Jesus, our hearts that were cut are touched by the Holy Spirit and made new. And with a new heart that loves as Jesus loves, we have a new bloodline in common. This new bloodline transforms our histories and our stories into a common history, a common story. Passing through the body of Jesus, our desires for personal power and position are re-formed and re-written by love. And we are given a common desire, a desire shaped by God the Holy Spirit, a desire *for* each other, a desire for humanity, a desire to love each other and to be present with each other.

When we have been baptized in the body of Jesus and pass through to the other side, we discover that we have been created new. As part of the Body of Christ, covered and filled with the Holy Spirit, we now have the capacity to love as Jesus loved. And when God's love flows through us, then God's desire for humanity fills us. And we find that we share a common heart, a common bloodline, common histories, common stories with each other, with all others. And we hold a common desire to love as Jesus loved.

May we pass through Jesus' body...daily....

And may we love as Jesus loved....