



THE THIRD ACT

May 15, 2016, The Day of Pentecost

Acts 2:1-21

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Theme: To live Easter, we need more than what's in us.

Come, Holy Spirit, breathe into these ancient words of Scripture that we may see farther than eyes can see, hear more than ears can hear, and imagine more than mortal minds can conceive. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

The week before last, Terri and I attended the strangest fundraiser we've ever gone to. It was also one of the most powerful. It was held in the lovely little theater on the second floor of Sacred Heart School. It was organized by a student at the school, the daughter of acquaintances. They're Arab Christians, one Syrian and the other Palestinian. The fundraiser was to help educate Syrian women.

The event is hard to describe. It was presented by two trendy-looking guys in black jeans, both Syrians. One was an Arab named Kinan, the other, named Kevork, was of Armenian descent. Kinan played the clarinet while Kevork drew images on a glass table, images that were somehow projected onto a large screen as he drew them. This for an hour without intermission. It could have been terminal; actually it was gripping.

Kinan played his clarinet very well, one long plaintive riff that followed the images Kevork was creating, projected – greatly magnified – on that screen at the front of the theater. The artist did this with his fingers and some sort of powdered ink on a transparent desk. Neither Terri nor I could figure out exactly how he did it.



The images he created were of Syria, images of the war. The first of them called to mind Picasso's famous and horrific image of the bombing of the village of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War – bombs, fire, screams, death. But over the hour, the images Kevork was making changed, often mysterious and ambiguous. The direction of their narrative altered. Well into the hour, he drew one wafting form that looked like a bright angel. Then there was another scene that looked to my eyes like Resurrection. The very last image was of a Syrian village with a door leading into it, an open door inviting the audience to *come in*, to *do something*. At least that's how I saw it.

Of course, I was watching all these vague forms unfold on the screen with my Christian eyes. What my Christian eyes saw in that hour of serial images was the three acts of the core Christian narrative. It was all highly emblematic, but it's what I saw.

First and brutally, my Christian eyes saw Act One – the cross. No *literal* cross, but all those Guernica-like images of suffering and death that are summed up in the cross. The screen was full of tragedy, weighed heavy with hatred and violence, scarred by despair and death. All of it too damn real – everything that's summed up in the Christian story by the cross.

Then there was Act Two, the images in which I saw Easter, icons of hope, visual declarations that death is not the last word after all, pictures that promised final indicative – “life wins.” On the screen, my Christian eyes saw the Second Act of the Christian drama – Resurrection.

Then, lastly, there was the short Third Act. The final image was a huge open door. The two artists, all in black, walked up to the screen, reached up and appeared to open the door. The door and their gesture said, “*Enter in, do something.*” If the First Act remembers that suffering and death are real, and if the Second Act is the thundering Christian indicative that “life wins,” the Third Act is the insistent imperative that calls out, “*Well then, live like it!*” “*If you believe that life wins, live like life wins.*”



But it's not that easy. It's just not always easy to live like life wins. Even if you *believe* it, it's not always easy to *do* it. In the Pentecost story Deborah read from the Book of Acts, those gathered followers of Jesus have seen both Acts One and Two. They've seen the cross – the fear, the suffering, the death – Act One. And they've witnessed Act Two – Resurrection. They saw life win, saw it with their own eyes just fifty days earlier.

But here they are now, stalled in the intermission between Acts Two and Three, huddled in a room in Jerusalem, wondering what to do next. They've not done much for the previous seven weeks except wonder what to do next. So here they are, gathered for a Jewish holiday named “Pentecost,” afraid of their shadows after what had happened, picking over nits of the past, wondering what to do, but doing nothing. They were not living into Act Three; even though they knew it, they were not living like life wins.

Then out of nowhere something they would later name “Holy Spirit” exploded in their midst. Whatever it was, this first Pentecost was on the other side of the empirical. The narrative is loaded images of wind and fire, a babble of languages and disciples who seem as drunk as skunks in the middle of the morning.

I can't quite wrap my head around it, but whatever it was, Holy Spirit – what I like to call “the Present Tense of God” – blows through the room, and suddenly these do-nothing followers get out there and *do* something. Peter, who had three times denied even *knowing* Jesus, is on his feet quoting the Old Testament Book of Joel and preaching a sermon. They all leave that inwardly focused, fearful, closed-door room *empowered, energized*. The rest of the Book of Acts tells the story of what they did. They told the world that in Jesus Christ, life wins. They lived like it, they turned the world upside down, and it cost many of them their lives.

They could do this, Acts tells us, because of what the book names “Holy Spirit,” a name you could equally well translate as “Sacred Wind” or even “Divine Breath.” It was something beyond themselves that empowered them. They did what they did not just because of their internal resolve, or will power, or personal courage. They were empowered from outside of themselves.



You and I are no different. We need that which is beyond us, bigger than us, outside of us, in order to live into Act Three, to step through the door and onto the stage and to live lives that mirror what we believe – namely that life really is the last word.

But we're a proud lot, all of us in this individualistic, self-starter, hard-working New York world. This culture would have us believe that we are, each one of us, perfectly self-sufficient, powers-unto-ourselves who need nothing but resolve, will power and inner strength, nothing from outside of ourselves.

Those Pentecost disciples came to understand that such radical and godless autonomy is a myth. They needed Spirit – not theirs but God's. But for us, this old lie of all-sufficient inner strength is something we're very reluctant to let go of. To let go of it humbles us. It humbles us because it turns us *outward*, and *upward*, and *toward God*.

Our reluctance to admit that we need "Something-Beyond-Me" is mirrored in a memorable legend I'm going to leave with you, anecdotal perhaps, but true either way. It is putatively told among the Cheyenne Indians. It tells of an isolated Cheyenne village on the edge of a forest. For years, the adults in the village had practiced a little routine. One by one, they would sneak out of the village and follow a narrow path through the forest to a silver stream. There was a log over the stream that had been worn smooth by the many moccasin feet that had walked over it. Looking to make sure no one else was watching, each Cheyenne would walk out on the log. He would look down into the water of the silver stream. Then in a quiet voice, he would begin to talk. He would tell the stream the deep things of his heart. He turned to that which was beyond himself. Then he would sneak back to the village.

Even though all the adult Cheyenne in the village did this, they never talked about it among themselves, even though everyone seemed to know everyone else was doing the same thing. One day, two children of the village found the path into the woods. Curious, they followed it, and soon found themselves at the silver stream.



Seeing the log over the stream, they walked out on it and looked down into the water. Before long they were talking to the stream, telling it all the deep things in the hearts, turning to that which was beyond themselves.

The children came running back to the village and called all the adults together. In great excitement, they told them what they had discovered, and what they had done. According to the myth, the adults were offended. Their pretense of autonomy, their façade of needing nothing beyond themselves was threatened, and according to the legend, they took stones and drove the children from the village.

Don't run me out of the village when I confess that I need "That-which-is-beyond-me," call it Holy Spirit or the Present-Tense-of- God. I need it for Act Three. I need it to get up on the stage, to go through the door, to do something. I need it to live out what I believe, namely that life has won.

Don't drive each other from the village either. I mean, here you all are here, *in church*. Here we all are – turning outward, upward, toward God, longing for Spirit. Here we all are, sitting on the log over the stream, looking into the water for "That-which-is-beyond-us." Those Pentecost disciples needed it; I need it; you need it. Don't fear it and don't ever be ashamed of your need.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.