

# *Preaching Pentecost Texts: Will Holy Spirit Fire Inflamm Again?*

Marva J. Dawn

Christians Equipped for Ministry, Vancouver, Washington  
and Regent College, Vancouver, British Columbia

Frequently I am asked—in fact, just this morning in a telephone conversation “Why do our worship services have no life?” Since September 11, preachers have been very aware that we have a pivotal opportunity before us because North Americans have been forced by tragedy to ask deeper questions about life and death.

But are our churches seizing the moment? Are our worship services filled with the fire of the Holy Spirit? Does our preaching resound with the “violent wind” of Pentecost?

Of course, things might have changed radically by the time you read these pages (I’m writing at the end of Advent), but right now I am afraid that we will miss this *kairos* time if we don’t wake up to one chief issue that deadens our churches. Even though much of my life has been dedicated to working on this issue, I seem to have only dabbled with the awareness of its importance. I say that because I recognize now that I have not known strongly enough before how absolutely essential it is for us to face with all our energies this evil: *North American churches are quenching the Spirit with the spirit of our age.*

We don’t know the Holy Spirit’s immense power because we keep trusting our own possessions, financial solutions, monetary quick-fix techniques, and abilities to work things out. We don’t know the Spirit’s enlivening of our daily existence because we find our happiness and security in comforts, an accumulation of wealth, stock portfolios, and the ability to stay in control.

I’m sure this seems too harsh, but I can’t stop asking why it is that Christianity is declining in wealthy countries and flourishing in those marked by extreme poverty, intense conflict, and rampant disease? *The World Christian Encyclopedia of 2001* reports that defections from Christianity in Europe and North America number nearly two million a year. Meanwhile, in the world’s less developed nations, Christianity has grown from 83 million to 1, 120 million in the last century.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, at the same time, the world is characterized by abhorrent injustice. And what are our churches doing to counteract it?

Just one statistic demonstrates the glaring inequities: Almost one billion people in the world don’t get enough to eat each day, and the poor diets of several billion more provide enough calories, but not enough basic nutrients. Meanwhile, an estimated 600 million people, mostly in North America and Europe, are overnourished and overweight. Fifty-five percent of United States adults—nearly 100 million people—are overweight.<sup>2</sup>

## *A Sermon That Raised My Ire and Concern*

The extent to which the wealth of our society can influence our churches was graphically revealed one Advent Sunday when I heard two sermons that made me wonder what kind of faith was being strengthened. The sermons demonstrated that the

preacher was letting our world redescribe the Bible instead of hearing the Bible redescribe our world.<sup>3</sup>

In the children's sermon that day the preacher talked about how we get ready for Christmas. I immediately stiffened because I am always astounded how little effect churches seem to have on children's notions of what Christmas is all about. True to form, the children talked about shopping and presents, Christmas trees and Santa. No one mentioned worship, repentance, thinking about Jesus. Most horrifying, however, was the preacher's talk about Mary and Joseph getting ready for the baby Jesus. "They probably went shopping," he said, "and fixed up the baby's room."

Wait a minute! Was he just joking? (If so, I don't think the children understood it that way.) We are talking about a situation of poverty when we ask about Jesus' birth. The people of Nazareth were peasants, living under Roman oppression. How are we raising children in the faith when we don't help them see the vast humility of the Incarnation and its inherent judgment on how we depend on ourselves and our possessions?

The main sermon was equally appalling. Based on the story of the annunciation in Luke 1, the preacher compared Mary to a relative who had become pregnant out of wedlock and in shame ran away from town for a few years. Nowhere in the text of Luke 1 (or anywhere else in Luke) are there any hints to suggest that Mary ran away to Elizabeth with such motives.

Instead, her affirmation, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" certainly resonates not with fear and shame, but with willingness to be part of God's saving plan for the world. Even more robustly, the Magnificat suggests that she went rejoicing at the powerful new thing God was doing as God sent the rich away empty and lifted up the lowly. Is the Bible calling us to new awarenesses of God's work in the world, or are we letting our own situations redescribe the Bible? Maybe we are not willing to face the fire of the Spirit, who scorches us with the consciousness that we are the rich who are sent away empty.

### *The Fire of Pentecost*

I used the Advent example because the influence of the spirit of our age on the preacher's characterization of Mary was so obvious, but what about the Pentecost season? Is God's voice trumpeting as loudly in this season concerning the rich and the poor? Could this be related to why our churches seem to have lost their vitality?

Part of the problem with the sermons cited above is that both demonstrate a blatant failure to pay attention to the context—historical and textual. If we think about the general historical situation of Jewish peasants in Nazareth at the beginning of the Common Era, we certainly wouldn't speak of them going shopping. Nor would we ascribe our own customary emotions to characters who in the larger textual framework receive angelic annunciations or who continue with a powerful hymn to the way God turns the world upside down.

What then is the greater context for the colossal text of Acts 2:1-21, the first lesson for Pentecost Sunday? For the followers of Jesus it was a time of waiting, high expectation, and perhaps some fear. He was gone from them, but had told them to wait for the Spirit's enabling power (1: 8). Meanwhile, they prepared as best they could by seeking the Lord's guidance concerning someone to replace Judas.

The next scene is extraordinarily startling. No ordinary sounds marked the moment.

It was, indeed, “a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting” (2:2). Why have we let this seem so benign?

Perhaps we need to have organists put on the 32' foot stops and run their feet over the pedalboards to suggest such a sound. Maybe we should find a recording of a tornado or Mount Saint Helens blowing its top. In our age of spectacular sound effects in the media and our over-familiarity with the text, we have forgotten how shocking the Spirit's coming is. It causes us to die—to ourselves, our pretensions, and dependencies on our possessions of wealth or power.

Then the disciples each received a tongue of fire (2:3-4), by which they spoke about God's deeds of power (v. 11). Peter especially lets Joel shake us with prophecies and visions and dreams, with portents of blood and fire and smoke, with the LORD's “great and glorious day” (17-20). This is no tame stuff!

And what is the eventual result? Not only are we missing the firepower of the basic story, but also we seem not to notice that, consequently, Jesus' followers new and old devoted themselves to doctrine, fellowship, the breaking of bread, prayers, signs and wonders, economic redistribution, and worship (42-47). The fifth and sixth items on that list seem to be sorely lacking in our churches, and it makes me wonder if we are really marked by any of the rest.

Do we have enough *doctrine* in our churches if we don't realize how extensively God gave up all divine wealth to become a poor wanderer who had nowhere to lay His head?<sup>4</sup> Do we notice how often Jesus spoke against wealth, offered food to the hungry, even rescued a party from the poverty of the hosts?

Do we really have *fellowship* with all the saints throughout the world if we don't share the poverty of our sibling saints in the Two-Thirds World? Do we have fellowship with our brothers and sisters nearby in the inner city? Are we engaged in the *breaking of the bread* worthily if we participate in the Lord's Supper and do not “discern the body” (1 Cor. 11: 27-29)? Keep in mind that the issue in Corinth was that the rich were eating all the food without sharing it with those who had less.

Are we truly praying in our *prayers* for the needy of the world if we never “put legs on our prayers” and make sure that sustenance and shelter are provided? Do we really pray, “Thy will be done” if we are not engaged in God's work to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and welcome the homeless into our own homes?

Do we actually *worship* the Lord in love if we don't correlatively love our neighbors who have so much less than we? Do we join those whom Isaiah criticized when we do not participate in the fast God chooses, “To loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke” (Is. 58:6)?

No wonder we don't usually witness many *signs and wonders*. We depend instead on our wealth and fail to practice *economic redistribution*.

May the Pentecost tornado rip through our studies and heap upon us insights for proclaiming its power with fire so that our churches can be kindled into flames dancing these seven traits of the early Church!

### *Additional Pentecost Power*

If the Acts text is used as the first lesson for Pentecost, then the second, 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13, also breathes marvels, for it names gifts by which the Spirit is manifested “for the common good.” It strikes me that many of these gifts—wisdom,

knowledge, faith, healing, working of miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, various kinds of tongues, interpretation of tongues—are common among Christians in the Two-Thirds World, but not as prominent in wealthy nations.

For example, why should we need gifts of healing when we have plenty of physicians and pharmacies around? We don't recognize miraculous gifts of provision for our daily needs because we earn our own salaries and can take very good care of ourselves, thank you.

I'm grateful for doctors and medicines, of course. I am very aware, however, of how easily I trust them and forget that God's miraculous interventions lie behind their service. Being conscious of my failure to recognize God's hidden hand raises this conviction once again: my wealth keeps me from knowing the Spirit's power. Could our Pentecost sermons somehow tear away the veil of wealth that smothers the vitality of the Church?

The Corinthians pericope ends with an emphasis on baptism and Eucharist as the gifts that unite us. Even these unfathomed treasures have become mundane in many churches. Do we remember that baptism is a drowning—not just once, but daily, for baptism is not merely the rite that initiates a life of discipleship, but the entire baptized life? Baptism is a daily dying to Mammon, our false hopes and trusts, and every other idolatry that keeps us from living by the power, and in the unity, of the Spirit.

Similarly, the Lord's Supper is *the* meal that unites and sustains us. As Jesus declares in John 6, the true bread is He who came down from heaven on our behalf. When we eat this bread/body and drink His blood, we remember all that He did; we celebrate His presence in our midst; we look for His coming again in power. This food and drink in the Spirit strengthen us to live now in His reign, instead of in the reign of the technologized, commodified world that constantly entices us into its idolatries. Moreover, Paul cites these gifts of baptism and drinking of the Spirit especially to deepen our unity. They knit us to Christians throughout time and space. Consequently, they keep us mindful of the needs of others—for the immediate context of this section of 1 Corinthians is Paul's criticism in chapter 11 of the wealthy who were not sharing with the poor in their eucharistic feasts. Did they not discern the *Body*, he asks. Do we also fail to discern it? How can we participate in eating the Supper without remembering that 35,615 children die *each day* of hunger and malnutrition-related diseases? <sup>5</sup>

### *The Pentecost Gospel*

One of two possibilities for the Gospel reading on Pentecost is the promise from Jesus in John 7:37-39 that those who, believing, come to Him and drink will find rivers of living water flowing from their hearts. John tells us, in case we miss the point, that Jesus said this "about the Spirit" which believers would receive after He was glorified.

I am always struck that we are promised *rivers* and *living water* that *flows from our hearts*. Rivers aren't ponds. If the water simply sits in us, it becomes stagnant. Might that be what has happened in many of our churches? Our wills (the meaning of the biblical *heart*) aren't set for the sake of others, and so the rivers of Spirit-graces-and-gifts aren't flowing. The water that could flood us with vitality is not flowing out to others to bring them life.

I think one of the chief culprits is our wealth. It stoppers us with idolatry when we don't direct it for the sake of others. We become saturated and choked, instead of overflowing with the delight of service to Jesus Himself in the form of the hungry and

thirsty, the homeless and naked, those ill and in prison.

The context of John 7 is significant, for the passage hints at, and overtly names, oppressions of Jesus and His followers (e.g., vv. 7, 13, 30, 32, 44-52). The promise of Christ's glorification and the pouring out of the Spirit takes added weight because it is given in spite of opposition and persecution. Can we realize that also today?

In a society that opposes us more subtly by means of constantly beckoning us into distractions that dissipate the flow of our river away from our focal concerns of loving God and our neighbor, can we let the Holy Spirit channel our water so that it remains alive and vital?

### *The First Sunday after Pentecost/Sunday of the Holy Trinity*

Three years ago I was invited to preach on the first Sunday after Pentecost for a congregation that had chosen the name Ezekiel for their church. That name was in my mind as I listened to the texts for the day—Ezekiel whose visions portrayed the siege of Jerusalem, God's judgment against the LORD's faithless bride, and eventually the return of the divine glory to the temple. Ezekiel grieves and laments over the destruction of the city and the people, the invasion of the land and the departure of the LORD from the holy place. And why does this devastation occur? Because Israel has not been faithful to its covenant with YHWH. The LORD promises life instead to anyone who "does not oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, does not take advance or accrued interest, withholds his hand from iniquity, executes true justice..." (Ezek. 18:7-8). With a name like Ezekiel, how could this congregation avoid hearing God's judgment against our disproportionate possessions and the LORD's covenant invitation instead to execute justice in the earth as those issues surfaced in Genesis 1: 1-2:4a, 2 Corinthians 13:11-13, and Matthew 28:16-20?

The first creation account in Genesis 1: 1-2:4a invites our Trinitarian reflection on the positive design of the cosmos. Only in the context of the entire biblical canon can we hear the fullness of the Three-Personed God as the Spirit sweeps over the face of the deep, the Word is spoken, and God's "Let there be" is brought into being. How much richer such a reading is because of its very ambiguity—for the overtones of the New Testament texts citing Christ's involvement in creation before the Incarnation (e.g., Jn. 1: 10, Col. 1: 16) and the Spirit's activating work for unity (in the Pentecost text, 1 Cor. 12) amplify our sense of Triune purpose for all creation to be "good."

What does that goodness include? The very pattern of this liturgy that begins the canon underscores the goodness of order, harmony, fitting appropriateness in God's glorious design for the cosmos. Can we respond in any other way than to be overwhelmed with amazement and reverence when we observe that day and night still always repeat their pattern; that the atmosphere hasn't fallen into the sea; that water ordinarily keeps its boundaries so that vegetation can flourish; that plants bear seeds and fruits according to their kinds; that the earth continues to rotate around its sun, to receive the beauties of both its moon's monthly patterns and a marvelous universe full of stars; that fish continue to swim upstream to spawn and birds fly south for the winter; that cattle and creepers and wild things continue to multiply; that human beings continue to bear the image of God? This extraordinarily brilliant cosmos fills us with trust in the God whose design it is.

Furthermore, the account of God's creation of human beings makes several

assertions that bear on our daily lives. The Creator designs the harmony of the earth to be maintained, for human beings are given dominion *with* the creatures (the Hebrew preposition is *b*); there is no hierarchy among them (for all equally bear God's image); and there are enough green plants for all—human beings and creatures—to eat (Gen. 1:26-30).

All this is broken by our human preferences for rebellion, for choosing what looks good to eat or is “a delight to the eyes” or is “to be desired to make one wise” (Gen. 3:6). These seem to be the temptations of our technological, commodity-laden culture, too, and, when we fall to them, they hinder or prevent us from maintaining the justice of God's creation and the possibility that every creature has enough to eat.

The Trinity's intention that there be no hierarchy among all who bear God's image is obliterated by the massive (and exponentially escalating) disparities between the rich and the poor in our world. When the Trinity Sunday Gospel lesson's “Great Commission” invites us to “make disciples of all nations” by “teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you,” we need to start with ourselves, for certainly we who are wealthy in the world are not obeying Christ's mandate to love our neighbors as ourselves.

### *The Second Sunday after Pentecost*

There is only space in this article to discuss a few Sundays of Pentecost, so I'm simply looking at the first three, with the hopes that when similar connections appear in other Sundays of the season we might pay more attention. The Second Sunday after Pentecost has the strongest texts for us to proclaim the good news of freedom in our faith to care more intentionally and intently for the poor of the world.

The First Testament Lesson for the day, Deuteronomy 11: 18-21, stirs us with its command to put the LORD's words “in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and fix them as an emblem on your forehead.” We are to be constantly reminded of all God's words, teach them to our families, talk about them at home or away (that means all the time!) and when we lie down and rise (to begin and end the day in God's will), write them on our doorposts and gates, so that our homes and memories are marked deeply with the LORD's purposes.

And what are those purposes? How has the LORD revealed God's character, which is to be ours as well?

In the text's larger context (just one chapter back) we read this description: “For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (10: 17-19). Perhaps we have such trouble loving the strangers in our world and providing them with bodily sustenance because we have not experienced slavery in Egypt and have forgotten our faith roots as an oppressed people.

Similarly, the larger context of the Gospel text for the day challenges us to reflect on what it might mean to call to our Lord faithfully. Matthew 7:21-29 warns us sharply that simply to call the name *Lord*, to do deeds of power, or even to prophesy does not necessarily mean that we are doing the will of Christ's Father in heaven. We might still be called evildoers (v. 23). Why?

Jesus follows this alarm, and somewhat explains it, with His parable of houses

built on rock and sand, which spurs us not only to hear His words, but to act on them. But which words?

Since this exhortation ends the entire Sermon on the Mount, we can look there for directions upon which to act. And what do we find? We discover the Beatitudes, rebukes against violence in word and deed, expansions of the commandments against adultery and murder, and, most noticeably, an extensive warning against storing and idolizing human wealth (6:18-34).

If we preach on the Gospel text from Matthew 7, can we avoid the Holy Spirit thunder and fire against the hypocrisy of our worship (“Lord, Lord”) if our treasure is mostly confined to ourselves? And then what a small heart we have (6:21)! Can we not pay attention to the Holy Spirit’s blistering flames in our consciences when we know that often we try to “serve two masters,” though Jesus assures us it is impossible to do so? How much more explicit could He be than to say, “You cannot serve God and wealth” (6:24b)?

Actually I’m disappointed that the NRSV translates the final word of 6:24 with “wealth,” whereas the Greek word is *Mammon*. There is a difference. Wealth shared, used to procure justice, or employed for God’s purposes is not the problem. Our guilt arises because so often we turn it into the god Mammon, an idolatry that pulls us away from serving God alone by means of loving our neighbors. I’m troubled that so many churches, too, make decisions because of financial considerations and not because we have sought God’s kingdom and righteousness.

### *Is This a Faithful Reading of the Texts?*

By now you might be wondering if I am not committing the same sin at which I railed in the beginning of this article—of letting our present situation script the text instead of hearing how the Scriptures rescript us. Why am I so concerned to show issues of Mammon in everything?

In response to that question, I will appeal to the entire biblical canon and the fundamental perspective it offers of the hidden way in which God works. As I have elaborated in *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God*,<sup>6</sup> God in Christ reconciles and redeems the world through weakness. Against the principalities and powers of government, Mammon, and religion, Jesus chooses the way of submission, poverty, and the true love of God and neighbor. These are the steps in which the whole New Testament invites us to follow. The apostle Paul underscores that with his comments about Christ tabernacling in his weakness (see especially 2 Cor. 12:7-10 and 13:4, part of the larger context for the Epistle Lesson on Trinity Sunday).

It is not by our wealth or power that we will contribute to the healing of the nations. In fact, as history continues to unfold, the wealth and power of North America continue to add to the destruction of the earth. Can we read the Bible attentively and not hear it calling us repeatedly to divest ourselves of those idolatries that prevent us from participating in the fullness of God’s reign? Can we read the prophets and not see that Israel was taken into captivity because they turned away from God’s Jubilee design for generosity and into the injustices of people who did not know the LORD? Can we read Paul’s comment about “the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for [our] sakes He became poor, so that by His poverty [we] might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9) without wanting to respond to his appeal for “a fair balance between [our] present abundance and their need [in a greater proportion of the world]” (2 Cor.

8:13-14 and also part of the larger context for Trinity Sunday's Epistle Lesson)? It seems to me that almost every day at least one of the five lessons in my daily lectionary devotional readings relates to the issues of Mammon or other idolatries that keep us from loving God and our global neighbors. Most important, the theme of God's desire and designs for justice is constant throughout the Bible.

Since that theme is so prominent in the Scriptures and since the injustices of our present world are so appallingly graphic, doesn't it seem that Christians in wealthier nations have been missing something major if we are not more seriously devoted to righting the invidious imbalances?

When the texts for the day are related in some of the ways demonstrated in this article, shouldn't concern for the poor be prominent in our preaching? When churches are failing so terribly to devote more attention and a higher proportion of their budgets to alleviating the sufferings of those with less in the world, shouldn't preachers do what we can to stir up awareness and action?

If not now, when? If not you and I, who?

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>See David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson, eds, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2001) and also the report on this book by James Billington, "Divided We Grow," *Books and Culture* 7, 6 (November/December 2001): 20.

<sup>2</sup>Brian Halweil, "Malnutrition Still Prevalent," *Vital Signs 1999: The Environmental Trends That Are Shaping Our Future* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 146. For a startling list of such-statistics, see chap. 1, "Why Are Our Hopes So Fettered?" in Marva J. Dawn, *Unfettered Hope* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup>I first learned the language of the Bible rescripting us and our world from George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984). See also William H. Willimon, "World makers: A new way of seeing and naming," *Christian Century*, 118, 24 (Aug. 29-Sept. 5, 2001): 6-7.

<sup>4</sup>I have begun capitalizing the words *He*, *His*, *Him*, and *Himself* again when they are referring to Jesus. I think we have lost track of orthodox Christian faith in the dual nature of Christ when we reduce Him to a regular him.

<sup>5</sup>The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization annual report, 2000.

<sup>6</sup>See especially chap. 2, "The Tabernacling of God and a Theology of Weakness," in Marva J. Dawn, *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001).