

Playing Out in a World on Fire

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When I asked my twenty-six-year-old son Drake what he was hopeful about, per the future, he replied, “The world’s on fire, what do you want me to have hope about?” I wanted to know particulars, where he found sources of hope, like the U-shape a cat makes curling up on a blanket, I wanted to know what his hope curled around. Maybe deeper still, I wanted to know if he had hope. My nieces and nephews are having children, and I know they have hope for their children’s futures. But, what’s that hope *about*?

As people with free will, we’ve used free will to wreak havoc on the environment, like two-year-olds at a party with tables of cake or dogs with snacks at eye level. We seem to have not cared about the wreckage.

We’re watching animal species go extinct before they’re fully counted. The earth groans under the weight of 8,000,000,000 people. Zoonotic diseases pass from animals to humans as we encroach upon habitats left and right, north and south. Stridency has divided us, to the point that even our “common” language has become coded with language of conspiracy and threat.

During the pandemic, what shocked a lot of people was the notion that we, as humans, did not have the collective will to do the right thing(s) by each other. In this version of our universe, there were those who went above and beyond saving lives and those who seemed hell-bent on the opposite, in the name of freedom.

At present, our reality globally is “at least 89.3 million people around the world have been forced to flee their homes. Among them are nearly 27.1 million refugees, around half of whom are under the age of 18.”¹ Can we fathom these figures for a moment?

During the pandemic, there were people in awe that they lived in the shadow of the Himalayas and could see them for the first time² because the air was finally clear. This was cause for celebration. Then the world opened back up, life returned to a new kind of normal, and the mountains disappeared in smog again, as if that story, the truth of the mountains right there—that near—as if that truth were not enough. Those glimpses of the Himalayas are like our momentary glimpses and glances of the holy. We see them, then they are gone, as if our collective will doesn’t want to hold onto the vision, as if the promises of Pentecost vanish like mountains in smog.

What are we to do? Dream different dreams? See different visions?

According to Harvard Professor Stephanie Burt, “The multiverse is a billion dollar industry. There’s a reason that studios plan to spend billions of dollars—more than the economic output of some countries—to mass-produce more of the multiverse: tens of millions of people will spend time and money consuming it.”³

There is, in stories of the multiverse, this notion that life is open-ended, that there are other options out there other than the ones we've chosen. Who wouldn't want to embrace the multiverses and "many worlds" where things might be playing out differently? These stories provide hope that things can be otherwise. This is what Pentecost provides as well, hope that things can be otherwise through the power of the Holy Spirit. We pray to the Holy-Spirit-As-Disrupter to intervene. "And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."⁴

For years I taught Major World Religions at a community college. I'd ask my sage friend Shri Chandak about destroyer Shiva in the Hindu Trimurti. Shiva is personified alongside creator Brahma and preserver Vishnu. We talked of the trinity and the trimurti. Shri would tell me, per Shiva's destructive nature, "Shiva clears the decks. Shiva removes the clutter, clears things out for a new start."

I think of this as I consider the tongues of fire at Pentecost. What has to burn that new life can emerge? How must we change? What must happen with us that we might be pliable people in the hands of our Creator God. Must we be open to dreams, and visions, and listen to prophesy from unexpected voices? What must be spoken and seen and heard?

I love Lizzo. The TV series "Watch out for the Big Grrrls" featured musician Lizzo and plus-sized dancers. As a black plus-sized woman, Lizzo has broken barriers per what a female musician "should" look like and what a back-up dancer's appearance "should" be. Lizzo was breaking old molds with this show, reminding women to love the bodies they are in, and her show won an Emmy. As part of Lizzo's Emmy acceptance speech, she urged, "Let's just tell more stories. When I was a little girl, all I wanted to see was me in the media, someone fat like me, Black like me, beautiful like me. If I could go back and tell little Lizzo something, I'd be like, 'You're gonna see that person, but b*&%, it's gonna have to be you.'"⁵ Lizzo recognized if she wanted to see change, she was going to have to be the change-maker.

Are we open to seeing those who are in our midst, working to widen the circle for others, to include others in our common life together? Are we ourselves open to God working within us however God sees fit?

I knew a person who truly disliked whenever people would tell kids "You can be anything you want to be if you try hard enough." He'd respond, "No, no they can't. Maybe they want to play on the NBA, and it's never going to happen. They don't have now nor maybe will they ever have what it takes. Who are they kidding? It sets up unrealistic expectations."

Sisters and Brothers and Others, what should we do?⁶ Pentecost can be a reminder God believes humanity has what it takes. It's an interesting affirmation given what

we've done with Eden-on-Earth which we're trashing to kingdom come. If God is among us with God's Spirit, then why is the world awash in chemicals with the shelf life of glitter? The Spirit fills humans, and suddenly connection and communication are possible.

Recently we had solar panels put in, and all of our electricity had to be shut down in order for rewiring to take place. The old would not hold. The Spirit is a master-rewire-er of both humans and circumstances. We don't need another universe where things are different. We can work to make change here and now, together. We can work to right a sinking ship. Like Mary as the theotokos, God-bearer, we can be hope-bearers, pregnant with possibility.

With Pentecost's reversal of the tower of Babel and the anticipation that we might all understand each other again, we remember the difference between hearing and understanding. They heard and understood what was being said. I can hear Italian all day, but that doesn't mean I know what's being said. It's hearing and understanding, both.

If we say the unlikely will be prophets, then our eyes need to watch for the unlikely as prophets. I've found in my own life that God shows up in people and in ways I didn't expect. I see this in the Holy Bible too, all over the Holy Bible, and my students in Literature of the Bible class were often struck, "God chose that person?" Precisely. It's not our purview. It's God's. Big difference. Big difference.

My son Alex is a musician, and a term I learned from him recently is *playing out*. Musicians use this term for sharing their music with the public, making connections with people, sometimes on a circuit. *Playing out* is what we as people of God are to be about, taking our riffs and chords and however we are strung, and taking it outside of our safe "members only" enclaves. In Acts 1:26, we see where the disciples have become *apostles*, the ones carrying a message, the ones sent out, *playing out* in a world on fire.

Recently I became unexpectedly tearful as I watched Jimmer Bolden sing the song *Waloyo Yamoni* in Lango, along with Allie McNay. Composer Christopher Tin wrote the album *The Drop that Contained the Sea*,⁷ and *Waloyo Yamoni* is part of that album. The performance I watched was filmed live at Cadogan Hall, commissioned by the Orchestra at St Matthews-Pacific Palisades, and it included the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, the Angel City Choral, Prima Vocal Ensemble, and Lucis choirs, with an enthusiastic Christopher Tin conducting. It felt inspired.

At the end, as some stood to join in, it felt like an ascension. *Ber* in Lango, an East African dialect, is a traditional Lango rainmaking prayer. *Ber* means "It is well." The performance felt like prayer to me, like watching Pentecost.

According to composer Tin, this album is ten pieces "sung in a different language, exploring a different vocal tradition. Each piece also deals with water in a different form, arranged in the order that water flows through the world: melting snow, mountain streams, rivers, the ocean, and so forth." Tin believes the world will

be reimagined due to water in the future, who has it, who needs it, hence the use of different languages. “And let the one who believes in me drink.” As the scripture has said, “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water. Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive, for as yet there was no Spirit because Jesus was not yet glorified” (John 7:38-39).

Can we imagine the Spirit flowing as abundantly as water in a river, water that is moving, not stagnant. How we wish for this, this Pentecost movement of the Spirit which moves things on and out and away from us, which we do not need, and fills us with what we do need—the Spirit who fills hearts enabling understanding of one another anew.

This performance of *Waloyo Yamoni* reminds me of the first time I saw Indonesian born singer/songwriter Anggun’s performance on David Byrne’s show “Sessions at West 54th.” Anggun stopped me in my tracks. Her voice was lovely, inviting, in a language I didn’t recognize. I paused what I was doing to figure it out, to try to grasp what was going on. I gave Anggun’s album to a clergy friend, and we both played our CDs to the point of them wearing out.

In this universe, how do we come back to God? Come back to nature? Come back to our bodies? Come back to each other, encouraging people free to tell their stories, dreams, visions, prophecies without fear?

This sense of coming back reminds me of T.S. Eliot’s poem “Little Gidding.”

Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.
Quick now, here, now, always—
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flames are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.⁸

Anaphora is defined as repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses; it’s used in the Holy Bible. We see anaphora in the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech: “Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive. Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed.”⁹

We go back and go back and go back. Sisters and Brothers and Others, what should we do? With the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we do what we can. We trust that somehow the Spirit can change things, that understanding overshadows us in a way we haven’t known before, like T. S. Eliot said in this poem,

We shall not cease from exploration,
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.¹⁰

Our exploring might lead us to new understandings which are new places and old places, both/and. We find each other there, and we find we can communicate. We pray and pray some more. We go forward as hope-bearers and God-bearers as much as we possibly can. As we seek to live globally on a planet gasping, abounding with refugees, we look into others' faces and know and understand we see the face of God.

Notes

¹ The United Nations Agency for Refugees, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>.

² <https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/himalayas-visible-lockdown-india-scli-intl/index.html>.

³ Stephanie Burt, October 31, 2022, "Is the Multiverse Where Originality Goes to Die?" in *The New Yorker*, October 31, 2022,

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/11/07/is-the-multiverse-where-originality-goes-to-die>.

⁴ Acts 2:2-4, NRSV.

⁵ Lizzo's Acceptance Speech, <https://www.elle.com/culture/celebrities/a41181984/lizzo-emmys-acceptance-speech-transcript-2022/>.

⁶ Acts 2:37.

⁷ Christopher Tin, *The Drop That Contains the Sea*, Tin Works Publishing, Decca Gold, 2014.

⁸ "Little Gidding" is the last of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* (Boston, MarinerBooks: Houghton Muffin Harcourt, 1971), 49.

⁹ The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" Speech, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkhaveadream.htm>.

¹⁰ "Little Gidding."