

Pentecost Sunday  
Peace, Seattle  
May 27, 2012  
Ezekiel 37:1-14; Acts 2:1-21;  
Romans 8:22-27, John 15:26-27

## **PROPELLED INTO THE PUBLIC SQUARE**

**People who've been close enough to hear it compare its sound to a freight train, or a powerful waterfall, or the roaring of jet engines close at hand.**

Whatever the descriptors, that's what the people of Joplin, Missouri heard one year ago this month (5/22) when one of the most violent storms ever recorded, an F5 tornado one mile wide, concentrated its full fury on their town, leaving a path of destruction in its wake that was total: 160 people dead, whole neighborhoods completely obliterated, property damage over 2 billion dollars.

Maybe you recall the picture we had posted on the narthex glass last May of the damage sustained by our ELCA sister congregation in Joplin—Peace Lutheran Church. All that remained was the church's wooden sign lying on top of piles of shattered wood, twisted steel, and brick rubble.<sup>1</sup>

**One year later Peace Lutheran of Joplin has not yet begun to rebuild.** The concrete slab on which the church building once stood, remains clear and empty. For the past 12 months a neighboring church that came through the tornado unscathed hosts Peace worship services, except for last Sunday, when to mark the first anniversary, the Peace congregation returned to their own parking lot, just as they did on the Sunday following the devastating tornado.

**Go to the Peace Lutheran website<sup>2</sup>** and you'll find messages capturing the complexity of a community trying to find its way forward. **The first one reads:**

Pictures Wanted. Help keep the history of Peace Lutheran alive. Most photos in the church were destroyed in the tornado. If you have any pictures you would like to share, please contact the church office.

**And this appeal, also on the Peace homepage:**

At the first anniversary of the Joplin tornado, it's time for reflection, healing, and letting go of what was so we can face ourselves toward the future.

Meanwhile, an article in last week's Joplin Globe speaks of the emotional scars that remain from the storm one year after its disturbing visitation, and how a nationally recognized program called Camp Noah will conduct camps in Joplin this summer to help children continue to heal by processing their experiences from the disaster.<sup>3</sup>

**On the one hand**, the past is past; it's out of our control. Until we are able to let it go, we remain captive to it and cannot face the future.

**On the other hand**, the past remains palpably present through the memories and experiences we carry inside ourselves. We embody the past—sometimes quite literally—in the physical and psychic scars that remain, and can be rendered as helpless as dry bones.

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<sup>1</sup> For photos of the aftermath and events which followed, go to: <http://peacejoplin.org/tornado.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <http://peacejoplin.org>

<sup>3</sup> You can learn more about the program by following this [LINK](#).

**I think our brothers and sisters in the faith community described in Acts would identify closely with our brothers and sisters in Joplin.**

In the second chapter of Acts, Luke describes the outpouring of God's Spirit on Pentecost as the "rush of a violent wind." But instead of wind bent on destruction, this wind, this Spirit, unhinges God's fledgling community from a past that no longer works and pulls them in the open air of a surprising, boundless future.

**But this move raises at least as many questions for them as it answers.**

- How will we find our compass in a world where all the familiar landmarks have gone missing?
- How now do we understand our heritage?
- As we sift through the debris, what do salvage and what do we bury?
- How will we know when we're on the right path and when we're heading in the wrong direction?
- And how will we know when we've arrived?

**The sacred wind that blew so powerfully that day sent them careening out of the house where they'd been holed up waiting and into the public square.** And it's in the midst of that public place, in that moment, where the real action begins to unfold.

**Ears are opened, tongues are loosened, minds unleashed.**

**The old boundaries of race, nationality and language are put aside as the new language of forgiveness and transformation takes center stage.**

**Listen:** take a survey of the stories cataloging the gospel's trajectory in ACTS, and you'll find that most of the key scenes—beginning right here—unfold in public places, not in private domains.

- Peter and John in the temple
- Stephen in the city
- Philip on the public road
- Paul, Barnabas and Silas in the synagogues and marketplaces of Antioch, Philippi, Thessalonica, and the Areopagus in Athens.

**WHAT GIVES?** It's as if the Spirit were putting us on notice: **this power, this message, this experience, is designed by God to move you as witnesses into all the public spheres of your lives—don't keep it private, don't hide it under a bushel, take it out and let it shine!**

**The Psalm we sang captures the essence:**

(Sing) *When you send forth your Spirit we are renewed we are renewed!*<sup>4</sup>

**We are renewed! And thank God for that! For we need renewal, do we not?**

**We need these dry bones roused from the grave; need God's Spirit/Breath to animate us once more.**

"ALL CREATION GROANS," says Paul, "LIKE A WOMAN IN LABOR, AND NOT ONLY CREATION—WE TOO, WHO HAVE THE FIRST FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT GROAN INWARDLY WHILE WE WAIT FOR ADOPTION, AND THE REDEMPTION OF OUR WHOLE SELVES."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> For a powerful and lively rendition of *Psalm 104*, see the arrangement by Ray Makeever in his *Dancing at the Harvest* collection. © 1987, Admin. Augsburg Fortress.

<sup>5</sup> Romans 8:22-23

**Something is being birthed here this day. That's what the scriptures are telling us!**

**Something is coming to life, taking its first breath here on Pentecost, in an old city with a long history and an even longer memory, God is bringing about something new. God is saying:  
HERE IT IS! TAKE IT! YOU'VE DREAMED IT—YOUR ANCESTORS DREAMED IT!  
NOW YOU GET TO LIVE IT! AND I'M GIVING YOU EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO MAKE IT SO!**

**The Advocate compels us and propels us to take up our places in the public square.**

**“ADVOCATE.” That’s an interesting name, isn’t it? Advocate. Champion. Benefactor. Guardian. Defender. There’s nothing timid or shy or weak or wishy-washy about that name or about that role, is there?**

**To be an advocate in faith is to go public with a message; to be an advocate is to be willing to take risks. And what we see in Acts, what we come face to face with, is a risk-taking people.**

**Bread for the World is a Christian organization that embodies that Spirit.<sup>6</sup>**

This spring, Bread for the World is one of the public voices leading the charge against proposals in congress that would eviscerate the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) at a time when 49 million Americans struggle to put food on the table.

A mother from one of those families was in my office last week looking for help. With no money to pay the bill their electricity was cut off two weeks ago. No electricity means no lights, no heat, no stove or microwave, no refrigerator nor food that requires refrigeration; no washer or dryer, no hot water.

They’re living in a basement room off of canned goods and a little portable gas stove she fires up in the garage. To give her sons a shower she heats up water in a pot on that same portable stove. Her sons, 14 and 15, study at night by candlelight. She knows there’s a risk, but what can she do?

I gave this mother the last of the grant money we had in our Agape Fund so she could buy food, and how I wished it could have been more.

**To put it all in perspective, you need to know that the size of cuts to the Food Stamp program being considered by Congress right now is truly staggering and will drive many more families into the same predicament.**

In order to make up the difference in the cuts being proposed, every church in the country—every one—would have to establish a \$50,000 budget line dedicated to feeding people — and do it every year for the next 10 years.<sup>7</sup>

**In a recent essay for Bread for the World, Lisa Sharon Harper, knowing that public policy has the potential both to bless and to curse families, asks: How can we create policies that bless people for generations?<sup>8</sup>**

“Evident throughout my family tree,” she writes, “are the twisted scars left by the shaping forces of public policy that bent ancestral branches in one direction or another.”

- “My grandfather’s branch, Cherokee and Chickasaw Native Americans, yielded to the power of public policy when the Indian Removal Act of 1830 ordered the forced removal of the five tribes from the southeastern homelands they had known for thousands of years.

<sup>6</sup> Learn more about it @ <http://www.bread.org/>

<sup>7</sup> From Bread for the World’s website. Here’s the [LINK](#).

<sup>8</sup> For her full essay go to: <http://www.bread.org/what-we-do/resources/newsletter/may-june-2012/my-ancestors-stories.html>

- “My grandmother’s branch—Africans who had been brought to America—bore the brunt of public policies passed in Virginia in the seventeenth century...Judicial law established in 1640 and 1662 determined the course of her life. According to the law, even though Lea was half white, she was enslaved upon birth because her mother was a slave. Of Lea’s 13 children those born before the Emancipation Proclamation were born into perpetual slavery because Lea was a slave.
- “My ancestors’ status as ethnic minorities and immigrants in the United States offered them the experience of contributing much to and being profoundly shaped by the American public square. While they lived and loved and worked in the context of families and communities and relationships, the grand trajectories of their lives were often shaped by the overwhelming force of public policies enacted in their times. Sometimes those policies blessed. Sometimes they cursed.”

One of the hallmarks that distinguished the first Christians from every other religious or social group in the first century was the love and care they showed the most vulnerable among them. Animated by the Spirit of the risen Christ, the discipleship community reached out to make certain that none was hungry or lacking the basics needed to sustain life.

Their witness was a public witness—folks who witnessed this from the outside exclaimed: SEE HOW THEY LOVE ONE ANOTHER! They wanted to be part of such a community. This same witness has endured even to our day. Our Agape Fund, our Pass the Hats, all of our social outreach ministries in their many forms, the food we bring forward today—all of it comes from that same impulse to love God and care for our neighbor.

When a church shies away from using its voice in the public square to advocate for the last and the least, it has lost its way. It has forgotten where it came from. It has forgotten who and whose it is.

**Engaging, as a community of faith, in public conversation on issues of human need and equality and justice is not easy.**

The conversations can be complicated; the perspectives diverse and multifaceted; the risks great. But we do not enter the conversation alone. We have with us an Advocate, one who indeed helps us in our weakness, one who intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

Engaging in public conversation on issues that affect the well-being of the vulnerable is not a simple task. But the public square is where it all started on Pentecost. And it’s where we still belong today.

Amen.