

SERMON
“Into the Light of God’s Love”
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May 23, 2010
St. John’s Chapel UCC

John 1: 16-28, 32

From his fullness **we have all received, grace upon grace.** The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has even seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” Are you the prophet?” He answers, “No.” Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” He said,

“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord,” as the prophet Isaiah said.

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal. This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.”

SERMON

Pentecost always reminds me of my ordination and my journey to my first parish. My ordination was scheduled for May 18, 1986, the day upon which Pentecost fell that year. And So it was that I asked Dr. Jeter to preach on the Acts account of Pentecost.

He began by saying, “The Pentecost account in Acts 2 is our text for this occasion. The text gives us two of the three great symbols for the Holy Spirit: wind and fire. The third symbol, the dove, will have to wait ‘til another time since it’s not in this text, and since Becky told me I only have ten minutes. Consider then, wind and fire.”

From there, my mentor, my preaching professor and my friend, lead us into the realms of fire and wind as only a great preacher can. He pointed to the unique relationship between wind and fire. How fire cannot live without oxygen. How fire creates and consumes wind. How wind can extinguish a small fire and increase a strong fire. And how Fire and wind have the ability to strengthen or destroy the other.

He said, “Wind and fire together can do strange things: things which obliterate and things which strengthen. Is this not the action of the Holy Spirit in our lives? To **lift us up, to give life and voice and strength**? And sometimes, to **knock us down and wipe up out**? And is this not representative of our effects upon the Holy Spirit? To help the Spirit of God through our prayers and our service? Or to hinder the Spirit’s word through our sins? We live on the boundary of wind and fire: living, dying, creating, destroying, lifting up, knocking down, helping, hurting—a terrible and wonderful place to be. God-given life, places us on the bloody path of promise that lies between creation and destruction. The breath of life God blows into us warms and enlightens us with love and presence. It also burns.”

Then he spoke words that haunt me to this day. He laid the responsibility on me. “We’ve come together today to set apart this woman for the ministry of the Church: the ministry

of appropriating the symbols of Pentecost. We ordain Becky today to **tend our lamps so that they burn as brightly** as they can, to try with all her might **to still the winds when they're too strong for us**; and when we languish for lack of oxygen, for lack of gospel, to **turn up the wind machine**. It will also be for her to help us when our lamps burn low, to lend us fire from her lamp when she can, and when at last our lamps go out, to hold before us the truth that the day is coming when we will need no light of lamp or sun, because in the New Jerusalem, God will be our light.”

Then he turned and looked me straight in the eye with such warmth and love. “We ordain you, Becky Hebert, to the ministry of the gospel, to live and work on the boundary of wind and fire, a terrible, wonderful place to be. Marshall the Warm Wind of God for us, Becky, lead us out of the winter of our discontent, drive out the ancient frost-hair nightmare from our souls, and bring us into the glorious light of God.”

For those frozen moments I felt so perfectly loved. I, Becky Hebert, had been chosen by God and affirmed by the Church with great purpose. I cried uncontrollable tears of joy. My mother and daughters beamed with pride as they robed me. Two elders of the church put a stole around my neck and hugged me. The room filled with **grace upon grace**. I filled with loved.

The horrific responsibility that came with his words did not register until days later. I had thrown all caution to the wind and accepted a position as Associate Minister at Park Avenue Christian Church, NY, NY. I was walking away from life as I had known it, to live in the city that never sleeps—where nary a soul did I know.

On board the plane I thought, “What am I doing? Who was I to think I could accomplish this lofty task? What had I really learned in seminary that would help me do all those great and wonderful things Joey Jeter had laid on me? I wanted to crawl into a big hole, pull the covers

over my head, and will the world away. What I got instead was a nagging question. “What’s the meaning of the third symbol for the Holy Spirit? How does the dove fit into the scheme of things?” Consider then the dove, the third symbol of the Holy Spirit, the symbol of peace and love.”

Thus I considered. With butterflies in my stomach, I took a deep breath and tried to relax and consider the dove. I thought of John the Baptist saying he had seen the Spirit descending like a dove upon One who was much greater than he. “I baptize with water; but among you stands one who you do not know, even he who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.” John 1: 26-27)

That must be the reason for these nagging questions going off in my head. Was God asking me to consider these questions to keep me humble and clear on who I was?

The Jews sent priests and Levites to ask John the Baptist who he was. John answers by first telling them who he’s not.

“I am not the Messiah.”

“Who then? Are you Elijah?”

“I am not.”

“Are you a Prophet?”

“No.”

“Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”

“I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘make straight the way of the Lord.’”

“Now with this”, I thought, “I can identify”. I’m simply a voice—a voice crying in the wilderness. I felt like I was coming from the wilderness—a Cajun woman from the backwaters

of civilization going to the big city. Was the dove the symbol of gentle humility held in balance with the overwhelming symbols of fire and wind? Well, I'm here to tell, on that flight to New York I took a long trip away from my recent elation of ordination, and my feelings of being so all-fired important doing the job of keeping everyone's light burning brightly. Departing the plane and thrust into the craziness of hailing a cab and the frantic pace of New York business, fear consumed me. I had traveled from one end of the emotions range to the other.

Days passed as I tried to sort out all the confusion brewing in my mind. I told myself it was normal to feel so disoriented and lonely. After all, I was going through a major adjustment. There were days when I thought I would not make it. On those days, the questions from during my flight resurfaced. **“What are you doing here? Who was I to think I could accomplish this lofty task?” To these questions came the resounding answer, “The dove, consider the dove!”**

As I considered, new images began to fill my mind that seemed to contradict my past images of humility. A little girl dancing in front of her mother's dressing table mirror surfaced in mind. This little girl dreamed dreams of greatness. She felt...*special*. She was as elated then as she was on the day of her ordination. The years between the dancing and ordination had taught her she was not to think too highly of herself.

Then I remember coming to New York to be interviewed. My eldest daughter had come with me. We arrived in New York on a Saturday as instructed. On Sunday morning before the interview, we went to church. I meet that morning a writer for “Saturday Night Live,” a foreign correspondent for NBC, and the list went on. When we returned to where we were staying I said to my daughter, “I can't minister to these people. They are all so important.” To which my daughter responded, “Mom, maybe it's time you minister to your peers.”

Consider the dove! There are numerous references to the dove throughout the Bible—but with very little definition to its meaning—except in the Song of Solomon, the great love story of the Old Testament. The dove, because of its loyalty and gentleness as a mate, becomes the symbol for a loved one. The book of Solomon tells us of the voice of the dove, of the cooing and romancing of two lovers—of being filled with love.

The dove is the symbol of the glory and the misery of a love affair—of feeling ever so special because we are so loved. Our gospel reading of today says, “From [Jesus’] fullness we have all received grace upon grace.” Until, we are filled to brim. From fullness overflows the oil of grace that lights another’s lamp until it burns as brightly as it can. Being filled with love makes what God calls us to do possible. We are a people, all of us, destined for greatness. The greatness for which we are destined is not greatness as the world defines it. A greatness born out a competitive scratching to the top calls for the Holy Spirit to **knock us down and wipe up out.**

But when the Spirit of God lifts us up, to give life and voice and strength and we discount it, we sin. We open the door for darkness to overtake us with fear. Fear then robs us of oxygen and energy.

I walked down from my beautiful Park Avenue office and into the glorious cathedral I had been given the opportunity from which to minister. There I sat in the middle of light flowing through stained glass to reclaim the love poured into me at ordination—which I knew I needed to accomplish my lofty task.

John went from being just a mouthpiece to someone who had seen a dove—someone who had seen the greatest love story ever, God’s love affair with humanity. With that love image implanted within him he could do great things. To see one’s self as great is to be great. And in

order to see ourselves as great, we must know love. This is more; ever so much more than intellectually knowing God loves us. It's knowing it here (*signal our hearts*).

On this, my ordination anniversary, on this day of Pentecost, I don't want to fret over finances, building maintenance, or on attendance. I don't want to let fear overtakes us. I just want to be with you, and for us to be with God. I want to tend your lamps so that they burn brightly, and still the winds or turn them on full blast—whichever you need. I so want to marshal in the warm winds of God for us, and lead us out of the winter of discontent, drive out the ancient frost-hair nightmare from our soul, and bring us into the glorious light of God's love.

Amen.