

A Homily by  
The Rev'd Jo Popham

“Can you feel the Spirit of Pentecost?”  
Christ the King Sunday – Pentecost 25 – November 26, 2023  
Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24  
Ephesians 1:15-23  
Matthew 25:31-46

We Episcopalians are very much attuned to the rhythms of the Christian liturgical seasons. I am blatantly unapologetic that I am using today's sermon as a teaching moment for our candidates for Confirmation, Reception, and Reaffirmation. The liturgical year is one of those tools of the church that truly is a lesson in life – how to live a Christian life. What it means to live a Christian life – in the church and as individuals – may be learned by observing the seasons of the church. The seasons of the church drive our liturgy which is the work of the people. In liturgy we learn about the historical Jesus, but we also experience Christ Jesus in our own lives in the here and now. We come to understand more and more fully the Christ who is still with us.<sup>1</sup> And Christ is fully present through the Holy Spirit.

Today is “Christ the King” Sunday and today begins the final week in the Christian liturgical calendar. Often we call this season Ordinary time, but it is far from ordinary. Throughout ordinary time – the season of Pentecost – we have been making faith the force in our lives with fidelity and constancy – showing what it takes for us Christians to be Christian throughout the year. This Sunday celebrates the authority of Christ as King. Most of our marks of the seasons of the church have their roots from many centuries ago. But Christ the King or the Reign of Christ Sunday is a relatively new liturgical thump compared to most of our customs. This newest of our solemnities became part of the liturgical calendar in 1925. Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun and spiritual leader of our day, explains the addition this way: “In an era of the downfall of monarchies and nations, of security and peace...[it was thought that] only the acknowledgment of the kingship of Christ – above and beyond any other earthly power – could really bring liberty, order, harmony, and peace to the world.”<sup>2</sup>

There is no mention of the kingship of Christ in the 1928 Book of Common Prayer,

but the unifying rule of Christ has been celebrated on the last Sunday after Pentecost since 1979, where we pray that God will restore what is divided and enslaved by sin to be freed to live under God's rule through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. In our 21<sup>st</sup> century, "king" language is less popular, and some Protestant churches now downplay this feast. Jesus was well acquainted with secular kings. In contrast to them, his role was that of humble service. He knew the oppressive nature of secular kings in his day, but Jesus redefined and transformed the concept of kingship. His kingship was that of love and mercy and peace and forgiveness. Rather than a king as an oppressive ruler, our understanding of Christ is that he brings us freedom. So we continue to be moved by the spirit to call Jesus Lord and King.

Yes, this Sunday marks the end of the church year, but it also is the last Sunday in the long long season of Pentecost, the season that began with the coming of the Holy Spirit. I am afraid that 26 Sundays in the season of Pentecost sometimes feels a bit much to this priest, wearing green forever and sadly not living into the true spirit of this season that ends this week. In Advent too we hear much about the promised Messiah, the King.

So before we say goodbye to Pentecost, I want you to hear what Frederick Buechner reminded me this week about the spirit of Pentecost. He reminds us that "Spirit is highly contagious. When people are very excited, very happy, or very sad, you can catch it from them as easily as measles or a yawn. You can catch it from what they say or from what they do or just from what happens to the air of a room when they enter it without saying or doing anything. Groups also have a spirit, as anybody can testify who has ever been caught up in the spirit of a football game, a political rally, or a lynch mob. Spirit can be good or bad, healing or destructive. Spirit can be transmitted across great distances of time and space. For better or worse, you can catch the spirit of people long dead (Saint Therese of Lisieux or the Marquis de Sade), of people whose faces you have never seen and whose languages you cannot speak."<sup>3</sup> The WORD *spirit* has come to mean something pale and shapeless, like an unmade bed. School spirit, the American spirit, the Christmas

spirit, the spirit of '76, the Holy Spirit—each of these points to something that you know is supposed to get you to your feet cheering.<sup>4</sup>

In his book entitled *The Final Beast*, Buechner describes the coming of the Holy Spirit that I pray we never forget, because it marks the beginning of the church but also has the power to transform us again and again. Theodore Nicolet is the protagonist in Buechner's story about the Holy Spirit as Pentecostal fire:

NICOLET HAD GONE to sleep thinking of Pentecost, and it returned to him now, just coming awake in the shade—a moment not unlike this, he imagined. There were all the accustomed sounds of morning—the traffic, the pneumatic drill at work on the parking lot by the bank, footsteps and voices—and then just the first unaccustomed intensification or distortion of it so that the man unloading vegetables from his pick-up stopped with a crate of tomatoes in his arms and shook his head vigorously sideways as though he had water in his ear. The hum of blood in the head of someone about to faint: the sound began to drift and spread like a cloud swelling in the slow wind. A horn honked and kept up a steady blast that began to reverberate like a bell, a noise within a noise. Nicolet drew his feet together and leaned forward with his chin in his hands, his shirt tail coming out in back. The fire began unspectacularly: whispering flames from hair and fingertips. Then it spread to the shoulders, a conflagration swept high by the hastening wind, and upturned faces burst into flame with everyone getting out of cars at once and yelling, and only then did the big man raise his voice: "Men of Judea, and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you . . ." Nicolet watched a butterfly open and close its wings on a cannon ball. "The birthday of the church took place in the midst of terrible fire." That might be a way to begin. He got up with his jacket hooked over his shoulder on one finger and walked away."<sup>5</sup>

So we come to an end but an end that calls us to live into the spirit filled people that we are. The beginning we will experience next week is really a continuation of the work of the spirit. Mary was found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit. And in Advent we wait,

just as she waited. Buechner has said that “Advent is like the hush in a theater just before the curtain rises.” His writing is so eloquent, so creative, and so experincial. We find ouselves able to relate to his stories. That is why I share his words.

I pray that we can live into our Pentecost, live into the action of the Holy Spirit that swept through the people and birthed the church. In Advent we will experience the coming, the waiting, the invasion of the Holy Spirit that gave birth to the baby Jesus. I often have likened that waiting for the Advent – the coming of Christ as what we experienced in that moment of waiting in silence at The Miriam A. Friedberg Concert Hall of the Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University, waiting for for something even more extraordinary to happen. That moment when we wait – holding our breaths in silence – hearing only our hearts beating – waiting with the highest of expectancy for our son’s Christmas conserts to begin – is what Advent is all about. I pray that at some point in the next several weeks we all experience the breath-taking expectancy of waiting for the birth of Jesus, and that we recognize the fire of Pentecost in that birth process.

Lord, let it be so.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Chittister, *The Liturgical Year, the spiraling adventure of the spiritual life*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 188.

<sup>3</sup> Fred Buechner’s thoughts originally published in *Wishful Thinking* and later in *Beyond Words*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>5</sup> Frederick Beuchner (7/11/26 – 8/15/22) on Pentecostal Fire originally published in *The Final Beast*. See [https://wonderingthoughts.typepad.com/my\\_weblog/2010/05/buechner-on-holy-spirit.html](https://wonderingthoughts.typepad.com/my_weblog/2010/05/buechner-on-holy-spirit.html)