

SERMON FOR PENTECOST 2022

ALL SAINTS BIRKENHEAD

THE REVD. JORDAN GREATBATCH

A few Lenten studies back there were many exciting topics that we wrestled with. The one topic however that I found the most fascinating, was that of Angels. I think it was so interesting because it is not something we often talk about in church, or even in our discussions on faith. Yet Angels are mentioned throughout the whole bible and play a significant role in all the main events of the scriptures.

Out of our sharing about Angels we were lead to speak about our own spiritual experiences. One of the things that was shared during that discussion was the idea of near death experiences.

People who have been clinically dead, but have come back to life. These people often write about their experiences. I'm quite fascinated by their reports, though I don't always know what to make of such an experience that I haven't had. It's like those who give birth to a child, an experience I'll thankfully never have! But one that I'm sure you'll never know about unless you

experience it. When it comes to near death experiences there are always those who criticize and say its only imagination, a trick of the mind. There are others who are quite sure of the reality of these experiences.

What is it these people report concerning near death experiences? One of the first things that people say is that they are aware of being out of their body. They talk about being able to look down and see their body lying on a bed. So they are able to move about without bodily restrictions. Then they speak of moving through a dark tunnel, often at speed, and then coming into the light. The light they experience is often termed "iridescent". They also speak of being at one with people around them. There is a sense of unity and peace which comes from this experience which helps them return to life renewed. Life takes on new meaning and purpose for them.

2

The more I reflect on these "near death" experiences, I discover there are many similarities to the experience of the disciples at Pentecost. .

Today's reading from Acts relates an experience of such power that the Apostles changed their whole way of life. Instead of being sad, dejected withdrawn mourners they became joyful, purposeful, outgoing life givers. It is clear that it is this event we call Pentecost, the coming of God's spirit that caused the change.

They described it, as we read in Acts, in terms of symbols. The symbols they used for the action of the Holy Spirit were wind, fire, and foreign languages.

I believe that when we look at these symbols and compare the experience of the disciples with the near death experiences, we begin to see why there was such a change in the disciples, and in those who have had a near death experience. I also believe that we in fact have these experiences ourselves, though not in the intensity of either the disciples nor near death experiences, but through the many moments in our lives when we have been changed such as the baptism. Baptism is all about symbols. Water, oil and light. Symbols are so important to the way we understand God and the work of God.

3

So let us then examine these words and symbols used to describe the action on the Holy Spirit and see what they may be saying to us this morning.

Wind

The wind blows where it will, you see the effects of it, but not where it comes from nor where it is going. We do not see the wind. It's powerful, dynamic, in that it can drive windmills and propel yachts through water. It can cause destruction as we see in tornadoes and hurricanes. There is about wind a freedom, a freedom, a continual movement and restlessness.

4

Fire

Fire is the symbol of light and warmth. The warmth tells us of the companionship of belonging. The light speaks of the ability to see clearly. It's about being guided in the right direction. Light shows us the way.

Light

In near death experiences people speak about being enveloped in a brilliant light. They talk about being “bathed” in light. It’s not a light that blinds them, but rather one that guides and illuminates. It illuminates the understanding so people will know the true nature of things.

5

Foreign Languages

If you’ve been in a foreign country where you cannot speak the language, you will know the joy of hearing your own language spoken. Even if your own language is spoken by a stranger, you will drift towards that person just to eavesdrop on the conversation. Here is someone who could understand if you were to converse with them. Using the same language draws people together. It expresses so much about ourselves that we cannot even put into words. Using the same language brings a real sense of unity to people.

6

And so here is the beginning of that desire for something ‘universal’ that brings people into harmony. Here it’s expressed by language.

Out of this experience of the freedom of the wind, the light of the fire and the unity of common language, the disciples gained new life, a changed life, a different perspective on life.

Out of the near death experience of freedom, of light, of unity, people gain new life, changed life, a different perspective on life.

Both of these experiences may seem to us somewhat extreme. I think their extremity can help us see the fact that we either have had or desire, the same experience. Our own experience may not be as intense, but it is there. Pentecost points us to our own experience. Where then is our experience of the Spirit of God?

7

It is of course to do with our experiences of freedom, light and unity. Think of those times you have watched a sunset and been so

awestruck that you feel drawn into the experience. And as we baptize Theodore this morning we think about one of the most profound experiences – that of birth.

Think of being present at the birth of a child and sensing that unity which binds us all together. Think of making a discovery which helps us see which way to turn in life, and we realize it's the guidance we have been looking for. The experiences we have of freedom, light and unity will vary with each of us in the differing circumstances of our lives. The challenge is to look for, seek out, encourage, those occasions when we are Free from the things which bind,

Guided into the light of truth, Brought into unity with others. We give thanks to God for the many occasions in our lives when we have seen the Spirit of God present and active, working through us, working through this community of faith. As we continue to seek God's will for us, so we call on God's spirit to be present to give us wind, fire, and language, to bring freedom, truth and unity.