

“Swoosh!” (Part 1)

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

5-23-21, Day of Pentecost

Based upon Acts 2:1-21; Rom. 8:22-27

The 2017 hit movie *Jumanji- Welcome to the Jungle*,¹ starts with the usual cliched characters who appear in many teen-friendly movies: a big, muscle-bound jock who is struggling in school, a skinny nerd who is smart but socially awkward, a beautiful, blond, self-absorbed popular girl, and a shy, dark-haired girl with a quick wit, but no confidence or athletic ability. Each knows the role he or she plays in school and stays within it, until one day, when serving detention together for various reasons, they come across a video game. When they make the mistake of deciding to play it, to their horror and surprise, they are suddenly sucked into the game, into a very real and dangerous world in which they must work together to save the country of Jumanji or die trying. But they aren't sucked into the movie as themselves. While in Jumanji, they are avatars who embody everything they feel they are not in “real life.” As a result, when the same four characters return home having been successful because of using their new-found gifts, they are utterly transformed. The nerd has gotten in touch with his inner hero and strength; the jock has found power in knowledge and assisting others; the self-absorbed and superficial beauty has become a self-sacrificing and encouraging friend, and the shy, unathletic girl has become a bold heroine at home in her own skin. As my son and my other family members can attest, I love this movie, and have seen it so many times that I pretty much have it memorized. Although a few parts of it include juvenile humor, and the language and content make it inappropriate for very young children, I find it to be an incredibly funny movie. In the end it affirms surprisingly deep and important messages about self-discovery, teamwork, and moving past the limiting labels we and others put on ourselves, to find gifts we didn't know we had, and pursue adventures we might otherwise have missed.

The movie was a remake of an older movie Robin Williams made in 1995, which, itself was an adaptation of a 1981 book by Chris Van Allsburg. But in some ways, all of these stories are adaptations themselves of the story of Pentecost we remember and celebrate today. Before the Holy Spirit came and danced on the disciples' heads like tongues of fire, the cast of characters gathered in Jerusalem that day included a whole bunch of people who did not seem remotely gifted to become messengers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. Nathaniel was a book worm with a chip on his shoulder, Simon and Andrew showed more muscle and instinct than spiritual wisdom and discernment after years of making a living as commercial fishermen. Matthew was a number-cruncher, great when it was tax season but otherwise not known for his prophetic voice. Thomas was a scientist who was not inclined to share anything that couldn't be proven with demonstrable evidence. James and John were both popular loud-mouths, affluent, self-absorbed, and more preoccupied with their own status than the needs of others, and Simon the Zealot was a passionate rebel. We don't know much about the other 12 disciples, let alone the hundreds of other Jews who were gathered in Jerusalem that day to celebrate the Jewish holiday of Pentecost. But it's safe to assume that some of them were farmers, some were craftspeople who worked with stone and metal, dyes and cloth, and some

¹ Jake Kasdan et al., *Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle*. Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2018.

were businesspeople in the city. They were mothers and fathers and children, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. They were people who were leaders in their home synagogues and people who only observed the high holidays because it was the socially normative thing to do.

No one would have expected these folks to drop everything they were doing to become itinerant preachers. No one would have expected them to pool their belongings or risk their lives so that others would know about Jesus. But they did just this. *After* the Spirit swooshed in, not just while she did, they were changed, just like the characters in *Jumanji*. Although each still spoke in his or her own language, somehow, they were all equipped to serve Christ's way in the world. As New Testament scholar Beverly Gaventa put it, the Spirit's activity was both "democratizing and empowering."² Everyone was given gifts by the Spirit to serve the Lord's will. Everyone that day left filled with charisma in both the figurative sense of being compelling and attractive to others, and the literal sense, of having been given "a gift of grace." The Church of Jesus Christ that was birthed that day was a charismatic church and has been ever since.

"I'm new to the area and looking for a church," a woman in a bookstore once said to Presbyterian pastor William Carter.³ "But it has to be a charismatic church." "You ought to come worship with us," he replied, "We are a charismatic church." She looked him up and down and said, "You can't be serious." "Oh yes, I'm quite serious," he replied. "Do you have faith healings?" she asked. "We probably do," he replied. "But we don't make a big deal of it because after all, it is a charismatic church." "I'm not sure I understand," she said. "Do people stand up in worship and speak in tongues?" "No," Carter replied. "Most of our members would find that intrusive." "But I thought you said it was a charismatic church." "It is." "Then do you have any strange manifestations of the Holy Spirit?" "We have a few quirky members, if that's what you mean." "I thought you said you were part of a Pentecostal church." "No," Carter said. "We're Presbyterian." "Well then you can't be charismatic!" she said and walked off in a huff.

But Carter was right. Although many Christians focus on the wild and crazy moment when the Spirit made those first disciples all speak at the same time in multiple languages, the point of the story is not that Spirit-inspired people will speak in tongues. The point is that the Spirit is with us as Jesus said she would be, equipping disciples to embody the Gospel in their own lives in a whole variety of ways. Some of the first disciples probably went home and did that by the way they helped their neighbors. Some of them probably did this in the way they sang new songs or prayed new prayers. Some of them preached and some of them taught, and some of them delivered dinner to the hungry. They became the Church because they had been gifted by the Spirit to do so.

We are still the Church for the same reason. God equips us through the Spirit to do the work we are called to do when it needs to be done. It isn't our doing. We are avatars for Christ, gifted as we need to be, not for our own private benefit, but for the benefit of the faith community and the world. Again, as Gaventa puts it, "The promise of the Holy Spirit... extends

² Gaventa, Beverly, "Pentecost and Trinity," in INTERPRETATION: A JOURNAL OF BIBLE AND THEOLOGY, Vol. 66, No. 1, January 2012, 9.

³ Carter, Warren G., "The Gifted," SermonStudio, <http://www.sermonsuite.com/content.php?i=26027&key=y=y5sk2QFojbanrqsg>, accessed June 3, 2014.

both forward and backward. The Spirit comes as a result of God's promise— both the promises to Israel and the immediate promise of Jesus... But the promise of the Holy Spirit also stretches out into the future, providing women and men with the assurance that they are not restricted by their own paltry resources, that they are not to be left alone, and that God will redeem both past and present."⁴ This is what we celebrate today. We celebrate that we can and will discover things about ourselves, and teamwork, and moving past the limiting labels we and others put on ourselves, thanks to the gift of the Spirit, which God still sends to fill, equip, and guide us today.

“Swoosh!” (Part 2)

By Rev. Dorothy Churn LaPenta, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

5-23-21, Day of Pentecost

Based upon Acts 2:1-21; Rom. 8:22-27

You may not know that the official name for these liturgical paraments adorning the sanctuary on this Pentecost Sunday are called “swooshes.” I did not know that fact either until I attended this month's Worship Committee meeting and learned this term. But as I think about it, “swoosh” is a very effective descriptor for the Holy Spirit. SWOOOOOSH!

When we are unable to see things in concrete form, it's helpful to have language around meaning and especially our experience. It can be frustrating not to have the concrete before us, something bodily that we can talk to and ask questions of, something that we can measure, that provides certainty as to its qualities and characteristics. That is not the Holy Spirit, and yet our theology and beliefs say that the Holy Spirit swooshes around us and within in and has great effect upon us. We even ask for it. “Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on us, melt us, mold us, fill us, use us!”

What is this Holy Spirit? It is an integral aspect of our Christian faith. It is God's nature, promised to us in the scriptures. There's not a statement of belief in our tradition that does not place emphasis on the Holy Spirit. “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life.” “We trust in God, the Holy Spirit, everywhere, the giver and renewer of life. The Holy Spirit justifies us by grace through faith, sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and our neighbor.” “God, the Holy Spirit, fulfills the work of reconciliation in humanity.” “The powerful Spirit sanctifies us so that we may more and more die unto sin and rise into newness of life.”

Last year's confirmation class suggested some significant language in the conversations we had around the Holy Spirit. The participants probably don't even remember what they said, but I remember because I wrote it down. It was described as: “My very breath,” “My friend and companion in life even though I can't see this person,” and “The wind in my face and the gentle urge against my back.” We don't see the Holy Spirit, but that doesn't mean that we can't recognize it. How very essential it is to recognize what we cannot see.

⁴ *Ibid*, Gaventa, “*Pentecost and Trinity*,” 11.

David Foster Wallace wrote a short story back in 2009 called “All That.” It was about his childhood and this cement truck he received one year as a Christmas present. Now this truck was made entirely of wood, and the drum did not turn like you would see on a real cement truck driving down the highway. One evening his father said, “David, this cement truck is magic, and the drum does indeed turn, but it stops immediately once someone is looking.” Well, that was a challenge that a six-year-old couldn’t refuse. So, David would pull the cement truck behind him by the yellow string attached to it and then he would whip around quickly hoping to catch the rotating drum. That didn’t work. So, he thought that maybe the secret was to turn very slowly. That would cause the truck not to notice and he would catch the movement of the drum. That didn’t work either. He didn’t give up. He thought that if he went into a room with a mirror and looked into the mirror as he was pulling the truck, he would catch the action. That was to no avail. So, he had his dad pull the truck while he hid in the closet looking through the keyhole.

Now, his father’s intent was to get David to understand that it’s important to see in order to believe. He knew that David would eventually reject that there was any truth to this so called “magic.” His Dad even told him the story about how when he was David’s age, he tried to set traps and catch the tooth fairy. Of course, he could not because no such thing existed. His father wanted to teach David to rely on and trust only what could be seen. He thought it was working. His father proudly saw David as a chip off the old block with an intellectual mania for empirical verification. Nothing could have been further from the truth.

The failure of the boy’s experiment became for him a source of joy. As David reflected on this experience as an adult, he says that within a few months, he lost interest in trying to catch the rotating drum of the cement truck. He was more interested in verifying that he could not catch the cement truck in action. “I never stopped thinking that just because I couldn’t see it, didn’t mean it wasn’t real.” He writes, “I never got the courage, but more than anything what I wanted to ask my father was ‘So, what would you have done if you caught the tooth fairy?’”

Wallace says, “I didn’t have the language as a six-year-old. But what I learned through that experience was an origin of a religious feeling that has informed so much of my adult life. I didn’t know the word at the time, but what I learned was the meaning of ‘reverence,’ an attitude of hope taken toward what is not always verifiable, what cannot and should not be trapped or outsmarted or controlled.” In no way, does this negate empirical, evidence-based reality, which is essential for our continued enlightenment and progress in working towards a community’s health and well-being. But what this experience did for Wallace was teach him how important it is to hold the space for reverence, for the mysterious, the invisible and the discoveries that are made in these spaces. We are not meant to see everything, to know everything, to understand everything. We are not meant to plan every minute of the day or every chapter of our lives.

In this space made for reverence, when we can’t see, when we can’t know, when we can’t understand, our faith gives us the greatest gift, HOPE. God has not left us alone. God is still tirelessly at work redeeming the world, making things right. When we can’t see, when we can’t know, when we can’t understand, we can HOPE!

This is not a Pollyanna, “pie in the sky” concept. The Apostle Paul in his Letter to the Romans read this morning does not gloss over the groaning of creation. There are so many times when we look at situations and we think, “They are stuck. How will they ever get out?” And we groan! We have our own experience of being stuck, feeling a road of anguish and frustration. And we groan. We read the headlines, watch the news and we groan.

We could choose despair. We have that freedom. But that is not necessary. Paul says that the groaning can be a ground for hope. Just as a woman in labor groans with discomfort and uncertainty but looks to the new life that she will soon hold in her arms, Paul says our faith gives us that kind of confidence in new life, new ways, transformation. Christian hope involves an unseeing, enduring of the present, a space for reverent waiting. Hope is not operative when what is hoped for is in plain view, but precisely when it is not.

The Reverend Scott Black Johnson has said that the gift of the Holy Spirit has opened a space for reverent hope which calls us as the church to pursue the mysterious, the invisible, and the stuff that changes lives! What a compelling argument for faith and the importance of the church community that comes together to be God’s workers for redeeming the world and making things better! Now, what does all this have to do with our summer together which is going to begin in just a few moments? We will be focused on small group ministry because Elizabeth has asked us to do that, and Elizabeth doesn’t ask us to do anything that hasn’t been prayerfully considered. She knows and understands the deeper inner workings, intimacies and relationships that can come from these groups and how they can be transformational in the community.

My prayer is that we will go into this season together and into these small groups with a space for reverence and hope, affirming the connections and the histories that are already in place, but open to what we have not yet seen. We know there will be groans, but as we connect, we will learn that we can face them together. The deacons are planning wonderful gatherings, and later in the summer, we will meet at the labyrinth for evening vespers. But we also must remember that what doesn’t go as planned just might be our source of joy. (Just as that cement truck was for David Foster Wallace). Frankly, I can’t wait because I believe the Holy Spirit is busily swooshing. It’s not for us to catch her. Let’s allow the Holy Spirit to catch us and see where we go.

So, Elizabeth, this is my charge for you today. All good shepherds are consumed with worry when they leave their flocks. But too much worry is going to take up the space on your plate reserved for reverence and hope; time for rest, renewal, discovery, fun, and connecting with those you have been missing. You’ve done all the paperwork for the tedious Lilly Foundation requirements (God bless them). But now is the time for space and inviting the swooshing Spirit to fall fresh upon you. So, you and Nathaniel.... go in peace until we meet again. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

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