



Day of Pentecost Year B

This Sacred Discontinuity

[RCL]: Acts 2:1-21 or Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 104:25-35, 37; Romans 8:22-37 or Acts 2:1-21; John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

The Bible and the church year commemorate many moments of grace. One of these moments of grace is what we celebrate here on this day of Pentecost: how the Holy Spirit fell like fire upon the infant church, equipping that small assembly for their global mission, energizing that community with nothing less than the life of God.

Here are other moments of grace we remember from the church year and the Bible: the universe summoned into existence; Israel called to be God's people; messages spoken by the prophets; Jesus born and baptized; his suffering and resurrection; his ascension into heaven; and the witness of countless martyrs and saints from many centuries and many places.

We recall these moments of grace, and they help us recognize where grace works in our lives. For what God brings about in that story which we hear in Scripture and present in worship, God also brings about on the more intimate stage of our lives. Time and again, we die with Christ and are raised with him; time and again, the Spirit energizes us for some new venture.

Moments of grace are manifest through Scripture and worship. Moments of grace are manifest in our not so ordinary lives.

Still other moments of grace are manifest in cosmic history and human history, still other occasions of sacred discontinuity when the Lord of life, the God of surprises, decides to do something new. We can recognize these as well; we can honor them.

Here are several such moments of grace: when human beings first controlled fire; when spoken language appeared; when the first gardens were cultivated; when people started making pottery.

The Bible and Christianity present a God who keeps doing things never done before, and often God does these things through human agency.

Yes, there are cycles in this world that repeat with obvious reliability: the changes of the seasons, the stages of a human life. But God is notorious for also doing what seems unprecedented, such as freeing his people from

Egypt or raising his Son from the dead. These novelties belong to a plan and purpose we can only begin to recognize.

The Christian faith says that the Holy Spirit is ceaselessly at work in every moment of grace, not only the ones we celebrate in church. The Christian faith does not claim the Holy Spirit as a prisoner constrained by the Church. Far from it: the Holy Spirit, who is Creator and Giver of life, makes and sustains and brings to fulfillment every creature that exists.

The Holy Spirit is a subtle power, the secret force behind all beauty, truth, and goodness; every act of kindness and compassion; every wise insight and every noble decision. The Spirit's work is apparent in the stars we see in the night sky and in the microscopic wonder of single-cell organisms. Travel at the speed of light if you can; you will never outrun the realm of the Spirit.

So then, moments of grace on whatever scale are not rare, but plentiful. To thrive in the Holy Spirit means that we become more adept at recognizing ways in which the Spirit operates.

Have you noticed? The future constantly becomes the present on its way to becoming the past. As this happens, we must confront problems and challenges and tragedies. We must also open ourselves to obvious moments of grace, strange and unexpected gifts that appear in our lives, our communities, and in human and planetary history. Through such moments, the Holy Spirit acts and summons us to obedience, to creative cooperation with the high purposes of God.

A resource for our creative cooperation with the Holy Spirit is the vision offered by Thomas Berry. In his nineties when he died in 2009, Berry was an eminent cultural historian, an historian of religion, and a Christian, specifically a Roman Catholic priest of the Passionist Order. *The Great Work* and other books he wrote late in life have become popular and influential, and Berry has sometimes been called “the leading spokesperson for the Earth.”

Berry believed that humanity in our time faces a moment of grace regarding the future of life on this planet.

He does not minimize the environmental disaster that confronts us on every side. “For the first time,” he tells us in *The Great Work*, “the planet is disturbed by humans in its geological structure and its biological functioning in a manner like the great cosmic forces that alter geological and biological structures of the planet. . . . So severe and irreversible is this deterioration that we might well believe those who tell us that we have only a brief period in which to reverse the deterioration that is settling over the Earth. Only recently has the deep pathos of the Earth situation begun to sink into our consciousness.”

While well-versed in the details of environmental disaster, Thomas Berry dares to point us ahead to a promising future when he announces that a “comprehensive change of consciousness is coming over the human community, especially in the industrial nations of the world. For the first time since the industrial age began we have a profound critique of its devastation, a certain withdrawal in dismay at what is happening, along with an enticing view of the possibilities before us.”

He then characterizes this moment of grace by contrasting one dream with another, claiming that the “distorted dream of an industrial technological paradise is being replaced by a more viable dream of a mutually enhancing human presence within an ever-renewing organic-based Earth community.”

Thomas Berry emphasizes that the old dream remains powerful. In *The Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth*, he assesses it, declaring, “there is no dream or entrancement in the history of Earth that has wrought the destruction that is taking place in the entrancement with industrial civilization. Such entrancement must be considered as a profound cultural pathology. It can be dealt with only by a correspondingly deep cultural therapy.”

In the Acts passage we heard this morning, Peter quotes the prophet Joel about how in the latter days, God will pour out his Spirit on all flesh, and the result will be people prophesying and experiencing visions and dreams. Joel’s prophecy came true in that moment of grace we call the first Christian Pentecost.

Our time is also the latter days and may well be a moment of grace, an occasion of sacred discontinuity when the Lord of life decides to do something new and do that something new through us.

Already the Holy Spirit has launched a great work: washing away the sin of our assault on the environment, inviting the Earth and humanity to a new reconciliation and peace.

For those with eyes to see, the Spirit is even now engaged in this unprecedented enterprise: inspiring scientists and environmentalists, activists and educators and legislators, business executives and farmers and urban planners, people of diverse religions and spiritualities, to take part together in a new and great work. Yes, the Holy Spirit is humble, moving among people everywhere, whether acknowledged or unacknowledged.

The newer generations of humanity include many who are responding to the Spirit’s lead with especially generous hearts. They are putting into effect the vision God has given them.

Today’s psalm declares that God sends forth his Spirit and thus renews the face of the earth.

This is a glorious truth! But will we all become partners in the divine renewal of this planet?

Will we recognize and welcome this current moment of grace, this divine discontinuity where the Lord is leading us to peace as we struggle with something unprecedented?

Will we act upon this opportunity, and will we do so in time?

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