



TITLE: PENTECOST 2020
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Artist: Marcus A. Hong

"You may well ask: "Why direct action? Why sit ins, marches and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored."

Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter from a Birmingham City Jail"

"If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning. This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never does and it never will."

Frederick Douglass, from the "West Indian Emancipation" speech, 1857

I recently re-read the Pentecost narrative in Acts chapter 2. As if for the first time, I recognized how disturbing and disruptive the event must have been. There is a sound like "a VIOLENT rushing wind." (NRSV) Flame appears above the disciples. People think the disciples are drunk.

In this chaotic moment, Peter addresses the crowd, quoting the prophets:

"In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.
And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.
Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." (NRSV)

Reading this, I thought about how the Spirit might be moving today, rushing passionately [violently?] through our lives. This is the year 2020, a year of vision, when people young and old across the globe are striving to see the dream of a truly just society become a reality. Peter, speaking thousands of years ago, quoting texts a thousand years even further in his past, does not excise blood and fire from the reality of prophecy. In any age, it seems, for Peter, for Frederick Douglass, for Martin Luther King, Jr., power structures must be disrupted in order for justice to take root and flourish.

In the current season of Pentecost, in the year 2020, millions around the world are participating in disruptive, sometimes even property-destroying direct action. Confederate statues are being torn down. Bricks have been thrown. Protestors are facing violent retaliation from police. This is disturbing to many. It has caught our attention. It cannot be ignored. It has forced to the level of society-wide consciousness the reality of racism and police brutality.

While scrolling through news photos of protests in my current hometown of Louisville, KY, I was struck by the image of protestors gathered in a town square. Behind them sat a church building, closed. We are facing what many have called the double pandemic of COVID19 and systemic racism. In this chaotic moment, we face both a physical and a moral struggle.

The building may be closed, but the Church, in the power of the Spirit, is still active.

Many Christians have heard that God met Elijah as a still, small voice, a whisper barely heard. Yes, God is often the still, small voice. But, Acts 2 reminds us, God also speaks in the rushing wind and with tongues of fire.

Am I listening? Will I be ready to follow where the Spirit leads? Will I risk being disruptive? Will I risk being disrupted?



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