

May 31, 2020  
Pentecost, Year A  
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Acts 2:1-21  
Psalm 104:25-35, 37  
1 Corinthians 12:3b-13  
John 7:37-39

Maybe you have seen the television series *This Is Us*. To describe it simply, it's about two generations of the fictional Pearson family—a husband and wife and their three children. What makes it unique is the way it jumps around in time: while centering on the present, it looks back fifty years and more, and sometimes even peeks into the future. The official website describes the series this way: “This grounded, life-affirming dramedy reveals how the tiniest events in our lives impact who we become, and how the connections we share with each other can transcend time, distance and even death.”<sup>1</sup>

Let me repeat that: it “reveals how the tiniest events in our lives impact who we become, and how the connections we share with each other can transcend.” Because it actually does that, I appreciate *This Is Us*. But watching it is not exactly a *pleasurable* experience. I cry *at least* once an episode. I usually avoid shows so blatantly intent on making the viewer cry. But I keep getting lured back to this one—not by the *fictional* story, but rather by how it makes me think about *other* stories, including my own. By looking backward and forward, it reveals human fragility and tenderness; it's really about remembering and reconciliation.

I watched an episode as I cooked dinner one night last week. As usual, I cried by the end, because of a story arc too complicated to recount here. But I do want to describe one of those tiny events the show deploys so well. The scene is set in the current day. Kevin, the thirty-something-year-old son, has taken Rebecca, his sixty-something-year-old mother, to a record store in Los Angeles. It's a *real* record store—one that sells vinyl LPs, and provides turntable and headphones so you can sample before you buy. As the scene opens, a record is spinning on a turntable. We see Rebecca wearing headphones. Her eyes are closed; she is transported as Joni Mitchell sings, “Rows and flows of angel hair, and ice cream castles in the air.” Kevin watches from over her shoulder and then walks over. Rebecca senses him there, turns off the music, removes the headphones, and says, “I miss that crackle on the record before the music.”<sup>2</sup>

That brought me up short. I had forgotten all about “that crackle on the record before the music.” But as soon I heard those words, I missed it, too, amid a flood of memories. I remembered the record spinning and how it felt to drop the needle into the groove just before the song, just so. I remembered hearing, not silence, but that crackle, the signal that something was coming. I remembered pausing in anticipation, waiting with time standing still. I had the urge to find a record store and play an LP again. I even yearned for the LP collection and turntable I finally parted with in Seattle in the late 90s, seeing no reason to lug them on yet another move when I'd repurchased most everything on those easy-to-play, crystal-clear, scratch-resistant compact discs.

I've been thinking ever since about that crackle on the record before the music. I don't know for sure, but it occurs to me that the crackle doesn't *stop* when the music starts. It must continue the entire time the vinyl revolves under the needle. The music that comes is much louder, so you don't notice the crackle. Nonetheless, that crackle must always be there, playing underneath everything.

We have experienced a long stretch of difficult current events, and still this past week was a standout. I expect you know why, but I'm going to say it anyway. Last week the number of Americans dead of COVID-19 exceeded 100,000; last week George Floyd was killed by a police officer on a street in Minneapolis. In a terrible coincidence, as the coronavirus so often kills by suffocation, George Floyd was killed by suffocation. I should add that the coronavirus toll on people of color has been vastly disproportionate; if they were affected even at the same rate and severity as white people, tens of thousands of people of color would still be alive.

Standout difficult week or not, we in the Church are gathered this Sunday for one of the church's major feast days. It's Pentecost, the day we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit—what we might call the gift of the breath of God, the gift of the breath of life. This represents another terrible coincidence, if we notice that breathing is the opposite of suffocation.

Before the events of the week crystallized, and as we looked toward creating as “normal” as possible a Pentecost celebration, Noah selected “Hail thee, festival day!” and I encouraged you to wear red. But as the week went by, this began to feel wrong, and I thought about undoing it and planning something entirely different, something intentionally un-celebratory. But that didn't feel right, either. So here's the question: How do we celebrate when we should be weeping?

In a way, that question is always with us. Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of God is here, if not yet in all its fullness. Maybe we Christians are always to hold grief in one hand and joy in the other. If so, perhaps we should always celebrate even as we weep, and perhaps we should always weep even as we celebrate. Weeping *and* celebration: this duality is an ongoing aspect of human existence. Celebration *and* weeping: it may be that a continuous awareness of this duality is the *only* deeply authentic way *ever* to live as people of faith, in this world, during this in-between time.

With that, we hear the words of “Hail thee, festival day!” differently, and we see the red we're wearing very differently. Remember, Pentecost is the last day of Easter, the season of Christ's victory over death, a victory shared with us through the Holy Spirit. But here's a clarification: Christians aren't supposed to be death-deniers; we're supposed to be death-refusers. There is a big difference between denial and refusal. To refuse something, you first have to see it, and to see it clearly.

Red *is* the color of Pentecost, the color of fire and the Holy Spirit. Red is also the color of martyrs, the color of death with meaning. That the color of martyrdom is the color of the Holy Spirit makes sense to me now as it never did before. The true power of Christian *apostleship* arises exactly from our willingness to see death at its worst, and still to insist that it's not the end of the story. The true power of Christian *discipleship* arises exactly from our willingness to see death at its worst, and still to help the new story continue becoming.

This is the ministry of reconciliation to which God calls all Christians. Reconciliation requires remembering, remembering not for the indulgence of nostalgia, but remembering for the work of repair. We remember what has gone wrong, *and* we remember God's reconciling glory offered through Jesus Christ. We weep and we celebrate.

When it comes to issues associated with race in this nation, the events of the past *have* affected who we have become. They have brought us where we are and made us who we are. We must help one another to remember, so that we can embark on a new course of events that will lead to a new becoming. Weeping and celebrating, we must make new connections. White folks have got to get busy—dealing with racism is on *us*. It always has been, despite our denial and refusal. Just imagine what could be accomplished if every white Christian took anti-racism work seriously.

Today, Pentecost, we give thanks for the gift of the Holy Spirit, the gift of the breath of God, the gift of the breath of life. Remember Genesis and the first day of creation: “a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” Remember Ezekiel and the Valley of Dry Bones: “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” Remember Acts: “And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind . . . All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” This is our gift, too. God has breathed into *us* the gift of the Holy Spirit, the ability to speak so that anyone can understand. We sometimes forget that, but today we remember.

That crackle on the record before the music? Drop the needle, and there it is. No matter how loud the music gets, the crackle is always there, playing underneath everything. This week, I began to imagine the Holy Spirit as that crackle. God has started the turntable and dropped the needle. Even when things get noisy, God’s fiery spark is there, lightly singing. Today, always, the Holy Spirit is with us.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nbc.com/this-is-us>

<sup>2</sup> This Is Us, season 4, episode 15, “Clouds,” beginning at 10:22.