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I seem to have missed it, all these years.

The story of Pentecost Day [Acts 2:1-21] is as familiar as any in the Bible. I've read it, and told it, countless times. Here's this great, global gathering. A crowd of people "from every nation under heaven," says the text that every lector vies to read: Mesopotamia, Cappadocia, Phrygia and Pamphylia! Not to mention "the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene!" (It has to be true, by the way. Nobody would make up a detail like that.)

So, with all those people, and all the noise of that violent wind, and those tongues of fire lashing around to land on the apostles, I guess I just assumed that all of this took place outdoors. Must've been in some big public square, right?

But no! "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And ... a sound like the rush of a violent wind, ... *filled the entire house where they were sitting.*" [Acts 2:1-2] They were in a house! Somehow this detail had escaped me: All this drama took place in a house. Evidently, with all that wind and noise, and hazardous pyrotechnics, they moved on outdoors to begin their polyglot proclamation. But it started indoors.

I've been missing, all these years, the crucial, *initial movement* of the Day of Pentecost: the Apostles move from inside the building out into the world. Thus completes the transformation from Good Friday to the dawn of the Church. After Jesus' crucifixion, the disciples are terrorized, demoralized, paralyzed. They huddle behind closed doors. Then the Risen Christ comes and breathes the Spirit onto them and into them. (We heard it the Sunday after Easter. One choice for today's Gospel repeats the same story. Jesus says, "Peace be with you," and breathes on them: "Receive the Holy Spirit.")

And the Risen Lord is with them for 40 days. And then he ascends to heaven. And darn it, he's gone again! They sit around for 10 days: "Ascensiontide," we call it. An in-between time, if ever there was. Here they are, holed up again behind closed doors - slipping back, perhaps, into that discouraged, paralyzed state. But now: violent wind, tongues of fire, multi-lingual miracle. The apostles are blown out into the world on the phenomenal winds of that Spirit. Full of confidence, faith and proclamational proficiency.

Huddled and anxious behind closed doors. Sheltering-in. Sound familiar? But on Pentecost Day the apostles are catapulted outdoors. The Holy Spirit turns them from "dispirited" to "spirited," and gives them hope. Oh, boy, could we use some of that Spirit! We could use that Spirit right now!

And of course: we've got it. From today's Epistle, these familiar words: "*There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ... To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*" [I Cor 12:4-6] The Holy Spirit is with us every step of the way. And that Holy Spirit comes blowing again and again, that on its winds we may be empowered anew – both recipients and agents of God's healing.

About five years ago a documentary film appeared, entitled *When God Left the Building*. A screening was held right here at our cathedral. The film profiled two churches in decline. One of them was spiraling into oblivion as its members fought with one another, blamed their pastor and endured a crisis of faith. The other church, too, was wrestling with its future, and not quite sure what to think about one of its faithful members who had crazy ideas, like opening an outreach ministry in a pub. The theme of the documentary was how a church might take its life and ministry beyond its walls. How it might embrace change. And how to turn "church" from a noun denoting a destination, into something more like a verb, an action, a way of being – not just within its building, but outside of it as well.

For the past two months, we have been suddenly and unexpectedly cast out of our buildings. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us out. It has forced us to embrace change whether we wanted to or not. It has redefined how church both *is* and *is not* a "destination." It's invited us into new ways of worshiping, new ways of being together – and even more puzzling, perhaps – new ways to serve the world around us.

This crisis has deprived us in many ways. Perhaps it has unbound us in others. In many churches daily prayer offerings have taken hold where never seen before. Elderly and shut-in members feel reconnected by online worship. Study groups and discussions draw new participants from distant points. One statistical study in England suggests that not only is online worship attendance up, but one-third of the viewers are under the age of 35 – an astonishing development.

The Pentecost wind "filled the entire house where they were sitting." And when they left the building, at the sound of that Pentecost wind, "the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking" to them. It turns out that meeting people where they are – instead of just expecting that they'll show up where we are – is not a bad idea!

I wonder what we are learning from this hard time of both deprivation and liberation. I wonder how we will be changed. I wonder what former things we will cherish more than ever. I wonder what former things we will discover don't really matter so much. I wonder what new things we will not want to relinquish for all the world.

You and I are so eager to get back to into our church buildings. Of course we are! We miss one another. We miss the nourishment we receive there. Ours is a tradition that values deeply the experience of sacred space. We are not yet able to be back in our churches. It is simply not yet

the time. But in due course, the time will come.

As we prepare for that time, I have been thinking about one more theme of that documentary, *When God Left the Building*. Alongside the two declining congregations, there was another institution profiled by the film. The Eastman Kodak company. Even more dramatically than those two churches, the Kodak company collapsed. From dominant and ubiquitous to marginal and forgotten, it fell. And the documentary editors suggest why: Kodak misunderstood what business it was in. Kodak was certain it was in the *film* business. And they knew how to make film. But in the end, film was only the medium. The real business was images.

Some of the earliest research and development of digital photography occurred at Kodak. Had Kodak understood itself as being in the image business, the story could have been different. But the new medium was not embraced. The corporate executives looked to what they knew. The board – or was it Kodak’s vestry, or was it Kodak’s bishops? (probably the bishops!) – were not interested. Or not capable of seeing. And the rest is history.

“Does the church know what it is for?” asked the documentary. Do we know our reason for being? Do we know our deepest purpose?

In due course – slowly and responsibly – we will find our way back into our worship spaces. But let us remember that the Pentecost Spirit has blown us out into the world. Sent us there two thousand years ago. And in paradoxical ways, the Spirit is sending us there again in 2020. I expect that if we are to sort out what we need to learn from this experience, we will do well to be mindful of the Parable of Kodak. To ask: what really is our deepest purpose? What are we for?

Two years ago this week I lost my dearest mentor, George Councell, a colleague and friend for more than 30 years. George rarely spoke of his family in sermons. But here is one of his stories with which to conclude. George wrote:

"Some years ago one of our daughters took a serious interest in music and set out to become a professional. As I sat with her one day before an important audition, I handed her a card that read, 'Let them know you love it.' ..."

George knew that competence and proficiency and even beauty would not be enough. “Let them know you love it.”

[George continues:] “Our goal [as Christians] is so to live that the world may know that we love life, for the love of God who gave us this wondrous gift, the grace to enjoy it, and a passion to share it, for the sake of Jesus Christ.” (i)

To love, and to share the gift of life, for the sake of Christ. This is our purpose. This is our



Out of the house, into the world
Pentecost A 5/31/20
Bishop Gates
Christ Church, Needham, MA

reason for being. For this did Jesus say of the Spirit, “*Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.*” [John 7:38] For this the Holy Spirit anointed the heads and warmed the hearts of the Apostles on that first Pentecost Day. For this the Spirit gave them courage. For this the Spirit equipped them to cherish the old and embrace the new.

The apostles were transformed that Pentecost Day from anxious to confident, from traumatized to energized, from dispirited to “Spirited.” So may we be this day!

Happy Pentecost, Massachusetts! Pentecost blessings to you.

(i) GEC sermon, April 27, 1997, at The Church of the Holy Spirit, Lake Forest, IL

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