

Pentecost A 2020

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

May 31, 2020

Acts 2:1-21

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

There is a hymn which we sing at ordinations. When someone becomes a pastor, we say that they are ordained. And this hymn that I'm talking about is required. The worship directives are divided into "may" instructions and "shall" instructions. The assembly *may* do something means it's optional. The assembly *shall* do something means it's not optional. And for the ordination service in our denomination, it says the candidate— the person becoming a pastor— *may* kneel. But what must happen is the Invocation Hymn, which is specifically *Creator Spirit, Heavenly Dove*. You *must* sing that hymn at an ordination. It's unusual for Lutheran worship to be so rigid. But it is *the* hymn for ordinations. By tradition.

It's in our hymnal in two forms. The original Gregorian chant form. Number 577. And a German adaptation of that chant into a hymn. Number 578. Eric Holtan chanted one verse of number 577 at the beginning of this service. He chanted in the original Latin. I'll chant the same words in English:

*Creator Spirit, heavenly dove,
descend upon us from above
with graces manifold restore
your creatures as they were before.*

Number 577. And then the more hymn like version which we will sing right after this sermon, Number 578. Same words. One is more medieval, the other is more like the German Reformation from which it came.

Eric advised that for *our* singing today, we use the Reformation hymn because it's less strange than the Gregorian chant version. At my own ordination, over 23 years ago, we did sing the Gregorian chant version. My maternal grandmother, who has spent most of her life as a Baptist, later commented on how strange the Lutheran hymns were. Of course this is not at all a Lutheran hymn. It's a Christian hymn for the ages, a half a millenium older than Martin Luther. The commentator on Lutheran hymns, Paul Westermeyer, writes that neither the words to this hymn, nor the music, lend themselves to superficiality. Both music and text are treasures deep from the wellsprings of our faith, Not from the shallow end of the pool.

What's impressive about the words of this hymn— which is really a prayer to the Holy Spirit— is that this hymn has a very big view of the Holy Spirit. It draws upon multiple biblical images, not just the familiar story of the second chapter of Acts. The medieval imagination, contrary to

what many people think, was less dogmatic than the modern imagination. The first three words of the hymn are *Veni, Creator Spiritus*, Come... Creator... Spirit. This hymn is so broad, so big that it does not actually use the words, “Holy Spirit.” It does not say, “Come, Holy Spirit.” There are other great hymns and prayers that say that. This says Come, Creator Spirit. This is because the medieval imagination grasped that the Spirit gives life. In a very Old Testament sense, the Spirit is the breath we breathe. Genesis says in the very second verse of the Bible: *And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.* [Genesis 1:2] For ancient Christians, this meant that the Holy Spirit was present at the creation, was part of the creation. And so we have this hymn of prayer to the Holy Spirit: *Creator Spirit*.

So that first stanza that I sang, that Eric sang earlier in Latin— that first stanza says *with graces manifold restore your creatures as they were before*. This is a powerful way of asking the Spirit to restore us to the state we were in before the fall. To make us again to be the creatures that God intended, rather than the broken creatures that we are now due to original sin. The work of Christ begins our journey of healing and restoration, but it is the work of the Spirit which completes it. The theologians’ word for this is sanctification.

So it’s the power of the Spirit to give life at the beginning, and to transform and heal and repair us in the living *of* that life which was given. This is something that goes beyond speaking in tongues. This gets at the essence of our existence *after* Jesus. After Easter. The possibility for transformation and conversion that was begun in Christ continues now for us with the living presence of the Spirit.

The hymn— which we will sing in just a moment— the hymn says: *Your light to ev’ry sense impart*. Every sense might lead you to think it means our five physical senses: touch, taste, sight, sound, and smell. But the Latin word *sensus* means our perceptions. Our feelings. It’s not just hearing, but listening. It’s not just seeing, but understanding. Sometimes this part of the prayer is translated as mind, rather than senses. Paul wrote, *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.* [Romans 12:2] That’s what the Spirit does. The renewal of our minds. Our senses, our perceptions, our feelings. To enlighten them, to renew them.

I think this is the deeper meaning of all of the speaking in tongues. It’s not just a miracle. It’s a miracle that leads to understanding. To communication. To community. One of the many things that Acts chapter two is is a reversal of the Tower of Babel. When vanity and pride led to the scattering and division of humanity. But under the Spirit, the gathering of humanity from its divisions, the renewal of our minds for God’s purposes and so that life can again be as it was intended.

One last thing from this great hymn which we are about to sing. There are many sermons in this hymn. This is just one. The next to the last verse is about being protected from the devil. *Keep*

far from us our cruel foe, and peace from your own hand bestow; upheld by you our strength and guide, no evil can our steps betide. We have some popular ideas of Jesus fighting against Satan. During the temptation in the wilderness. During the harrowing of hell. But today's hymn turns the Holy Spirit into the protector.

I believe that this comes from John's gospel, in which Jesus uses the term Paraclete for the Holy Spirit. That means Advocate, Defender, Comforter. In the fourth gospel, Jesus says this:

if I do not go away, the Paraclete will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgement: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgement, because the ruler of this world has been condemned. [John 16:7b-11]

That's pretty formidable language. The Spirit works with us to overcome what is wrong and evil in the world. The world is wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment. And the Paraclete—the Advocate—is right about those things. This is how Jesus says it in the fourth gospel. So I think that the medieval capacity for perceiving the largeness of the Spirit is on display in this hymn. That our defense is in the Spirit as well.

We are celebrating this Pentecost—the third most important holy day of the year—in the diaspora of the pandemic. Unable to come together properly as the Church, we need the Spirit's guidance more than ever. Our society is unraveling into warring tribes and is losing the capacity to differentiate fact from fiction. So out of this very rich and encyclopedic hymn to the Holy Spirit, I've drawn out the pieces that I think are most relevant to us now. (1) First, we pray to the Holy Spirit to "restore your creatures as they were before." The life-giving and life-renewing power of the Holy Spirit. (2) Second, we pray for the Spirit to impart light to our senses. To renew our minds for understanding and discernment. And (3) third, we pray for the Spirit to protect us from our cruel foe. The Paraclete will prove the world wrong, Jesus promises. In the fourth gospel, Jesus calls this Paraclete the "Spirit of Truth." We sing our prayer. Our prayer for the church. Our prayer for the world. Just as we sing "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" at Advent to invite Christ into our broken and weary world, At Pentecost we sing, "Come Creator Spirit" to invite the Holy Spirit into our broken and weary world. Amen.