

PENTECOST 5/31/2020

INSTRUMENTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Paul is one of the most prolific voices we hear in the Bible. Writing thirteen of the New Testament's letters—although authorship of some letters is contested—and mentioned countless times throughout Acts, Paul's interpretation of the meaning of Christ and how His followers should live in and shape the world molded the early church's beliefs and continuously give us hope and wisdom, if not confusion once and a while, today. When you think of the large leaders of the early church, Paul stands strong at the top of the list. However, as we read about today, Paul wasn't always so acclaimed by Christians. Originally, instead of an encouraging teacher, Paul, or Saul as he was called back then, struck fear as a despicable prosecutor of Christians, an enemy rather than a friend of the early church. Yet, as we also read today, God was able to unravel Saul's life and create a new identity and vocation within him through the power of the Holy Spirit.

I can only imagine the fear early Christians lived in because of people like Saul. In the previous chapter of Acts, Saul is described as "ravaging churches by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison." When we meet Saul in our story today, he is on his way to Damascus with a request to be able to bind Christians and take them to Damascus! He's actively an emissary of horror for the followers of "The Way," which was one of the names the early church held. Saul was lost. Then, as it often does, the Holy Spirit shows up. The Lord sparks the ground before Saul with a blinding light. These heavenly rays are reminiscent of the event described a few chapters earlier, the event we celebrate today: Pentecost! On Pentecost, God

granted us the wondrous gift of the Holy Spirit in a wondrous way. Picture placing yourself within that moment. Imagine the flaming tongues descending, the forceful winds blowing, and the multitude of languages suddenly sounding, sweeping across the entire room. Can't you almost sense the feelings each of the apostles must have experienced? Fear turned to confusion yet excitement with the Holy Spirit's presence, transforming each of apostles' lives that morning. The bewilderment and majesty of Pentecost is reflected in Paul's encounter with Jesus. Paul's life is similarly rearranged in the awesome illuminating glow of the Holy Spirit. He hears the voice of Jesus, becomes blind, and wanders the city without food or drink for three days!

When God first speaks to Ananias and commands him to heal Saul, Ananias understandably questions the Lord. 'You want me to help this man who threatens the lives of Christians? Who plunders my people?' God responds with something that strikes me in verse 15: "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel." So Ananias does what he is told, finds Saul, and heals his eyes, saying "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." At that moment, Saul becomes Paul, his new identity. At that moment, Saul is unraveled. At that moment, Saul, who was lost, becomes found.

Many of us feel lost and confused. Especially, during these dark pandemic days, there is much to worry about. We may feel that our identities before COVID have vanished. We may be looking for who we are again in this new world of social distancing, face masks, and quarantine. The threads of normalcy and

routine knitting our identity and life together have been violently pulled apart these past months and are still unraveling.

Throughout my high school career, I've felt worried and confused many times. This past fall, I was a part of the Ovation a capella choir, the high school's premiere audition singing group, for the third year in a row. Ovation's trademark is traveling around the community and singing Christmas songs. You may have heard us at some of our larger gigs on the Mainstage at the Holiday Stroll or during the Community Men's Chorus Concert. I'd always been hesitant to audition for a solo for any of our pieces. I don't know if it's my midwestern politeness or primal Lutheran urge to sit in the very back pew, but being in that limelight always makes me a tad uncomfortable, especially with singing. However, after forcing myself to audition, I was awarded the first solo in the song "Mary, Did you Know?" I became consumed with worry about every little piece of the solo, "What if I mess up?" "What if I forget the lyrics?" "What if I jump the rhythm?"

Towards the end of November after practicing our musical set since September, it came time for our first public performance at the Southeastern Minnesota A Cappella Festival on the Mayo Civic Center Stage, and boy was I sweating. "Mary, Did you Know?" was our first piece, and my hands were shaking backstage in fretting anticipation. I could tell others were nervous too. We took our places upon the stage, and when it came time for me to open my mouth for the solo, something special happened: we made music. It was fun, sweet, bright, and I still look back on that performance with wonder at how well it went and how unwarranted my anxieties turned out to be. Our breaths that evening worked through our vocal chords, the singer's instrument, to create beautiful

music that brought us closer together as a group. Our nervousness yielded beauty.

The Holy Spirit works the same way in each of us. By ourselves, we are nothing. We are purely an empty vessel that wanders around lost, confused, afraid, worried, and without purpose. But with God's gift of the Holy Spirit, we become an instrument for the work of the Lord. The Holy Spirit comes, finding us lost and dejected, nervous maybe, and fills us up, changing our hearts and minds as it changed Paul all those years ago, letting us serve God and echo his beautiful sounds and melodious music of loving grace throughout the world. When our life unravels, when we're the farthest thing from stable, when it seems everyone has abandoned us, the Holy Spirit shows up, calling us into a new vocation.

Vocation and occupation are two different concepts. Our occupation is our job, how we earn a living, our spot in life. Our vocational calling moves us to ask the question: how can I use my occupation, my place in this community and world, to proclaim the good news of the Gospel truth. Each of us can do this, not just pastors and other bigwigs in the church. We serve God by serving others, and we love God by loving others. It's as simple and as hard as that.

What's so great about this is that it's not just me who gets to be brimming with the Holy Spirit, it's not just you, and it's not just Paul. God said, "Go, for he is an instrument." Not "the instrument," but "an instrument." God has chosen each of us to be instruments of the Holy Spirit. The church isn't a solo, it's the whole band. The impact of Pentecost doesn't simply come from Peter's individual speech to the crowd but the mystery of all the languages chattering at once. What made the crowd cheer during the Ovation choir performance wasn't just my solo, but our voices swelling together to create a complete song.

My parting prayer for us all on this pandemic Pentecost day is that in darkness we may call “Come, Holy Spirit,” to open our eyes to the wondrous works of the Holy Spirit around us in the kind words of a friend, the squirrel scampering in our yard, or the soft, simple smile of a stranger passing by us on the sidewalk, and to allow the Spirit to enter in and unravel us as it did Paul and resow us into a new vocation to serve Christ. Come, Holy Spirit. Amen.