

SERMON AT TRINITY UMC, WILMETTE, ILLINOIS

“GOD IN THE PRESENT TENSE”

May 23, 2010

TEXT: John 14:15-17

BY: Pastor Kirk Reed

The circus was coming to town! It was the best news ever for Michael, who lived on a farm during the Depression. He was eleven years old, but because his family was poor, he had never traveled beyond the neighboring towns. He had never seen the larger world. He had never been to a circus. On the big day his parents, who had to work, gave Michael a dollar bill, a whole dollar, so that he could buy a ticket. Can you imagine his excitement as he walked to town? People were gathering. There was music in the distance. And then he saw it moving down the street: a lion in a cage, two elephants, a clown, a juggler, a lovely horseback rider waving to the crowd. Michael was amazed, as he watched from the roadside. Finally, the parade was over. Michael saw the ringmaster at the end of the procession, wearing a red coat, carrying a whip. “Here, sir,” said Michael, stepping out into the street. “Here’s my dollar.” He handed his money to the ringmaster, and then he turned around and went back to the farm. That evening his parents wanted to know: “How was the circus?” “It was wonderful,” he said, not knowing that he had missed the show. He thought he had seen the circus, but it was only the parade.

How many people have been attending church for years, hearing the music, enjoying the colors of the windows and banners, feeling good about the words of Scripture and the prayers, thinking that they’ve been to the circus, when in fact the music and the colors and the Bible verses are all preliminary? They are all invitations to experience the real thing. The preliminaries can be wonderful, but they are only the parade. There is something more, waiting to be experienced. Something more. We may go home, thinking we have seen it. But have we?

How can we describe what is most real, most significant at church? This is how Jesus describes it: “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth” (John 14:16-17). Jesus is talking about an experience of the living God. He is talking about the Holy Spirit, who is simply God in the present tense. When God becomes immediately real for us, we can say: “Wow! I thought that the parade was good, but now I’ve been inside the big top!”

We are here today at Trinity Church. Why do we call ourselves Trinity? It’s because we know and love God in three ways. The mysterious God of creation (that’s one) became visible a long time ago in Bethlehem (that’s two). And this same God, whom we know in Jesus, is among us today at 1024 Lake Avenue, Wilmette, Illinois 60091. The God of glory is now (that’s three, three ways we experience the Holy One).

Think about it. Without Jesus, God would be a vague blur. Jesus makes God clearly visible. But without the Holy Spirit, Jesus would be like Abraham Lincoln, a heroic figure from the past, inspiring us in a distant sort of way. Without the Holy Spirit, we would admire Jesus, but we could never become like Jesus.

So the question is: if we've seen the parade, how can we get to the circus? How can we know the living God? The answer is Pentecost. Pentecost is God with us, not in the past, but today.

Here is one way I think about Pentecost. I'm camping with my family, and it's cold. My kids keep saying, "Daddy, we need a fire." And so I gather a few logs and some kindling. I take out my box of matches and strike one, two, three, fifteen times. Nothing happens, because the wood is wet. All of it is saturated. There will be no fire today. What if I told my kids: "Don't worry. Think about last year when we were camping and we roasted marshmallows and everybody was toasty warm. Think about last year"? If I tried that approach, my kids would say: "Poor Daddy. He's losing it." And they would be right! Children know – everybody knows – that last year's fire will not keep us warm today. Stories about the power of Jesus a long time ago will not bring healing to our world today. We need the healing power of Jesus in the present tense. That's Pentecost. What he did in Galilee is inspiring. But the real question for us is: what can he do in Illinois? Pentecost means the living God now.

Another example. Last Sunday my wife sent me an email from the Pacific Ocean. She was traveling on a ship with our daughter. They were having a three-day mini-vacation together. Her email from the ocean was delightful, but her electronic message was only the parade. Far better than the electronic word was seeing her face-to-face on Monday evening, giving her a welcome home hug, and then hearing her stories in person. What I'm saying is that Bible stories are like those emails from the ship. God is sending us messages that can be delightful or thought-provoking or stirring or profound. But stories from the Bible cannot compare with being in the presence of the Author. The printed words are essential, but they are not the circus. God has more for us than words or stories. The living God can change the Bible from holy words to holy ground.

You don't have to do anything special to experience the living presence of God. You don't have to speak in tongues or be swept up into the heavens. It can happen in our everyday life. Here's how it often happens for me. Let's say I'm feeling disjointed. I'm running late. I can't find my cell phone. It's not a pleasant morning. And then I remember: "This is the day that the Lord has made." I take a deep breath, and I wait, inviting the Holy Spirit to touch my soul. The Holy Spirit is simply Jesus alive today, reminding me that "if God is for us, who can be against us" (Romans 8:31). I can take courage. I can feel in my emotional darkness the living presence of God. I know that I'm not alone.

Do you have a past tense God? Are you open to something more than the parade? Even though they were in slavery, many African Americans knew that God is more than an idea, more than a word, more than a doctrine. They were able to sing about God in the present tense: "Sometimes I feel discourage and think my work's in vain, / But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again." That's the real meaning of Pentecost. It's not last year's fire. It's the living God. Not yesterday. But now.