

Eídon

A Newsletter on Christian Spirituality for Church Leaders

May 2009

Matthew's "Pentecost"

Loosed Upon the World

The church that I grew up in was deeply suspicious of the world. To keep the world away, the church of my childhood tried to erect visible markers of difference. Women were to wear prayer coverings. Men were to dress plainly. Youth were to stay away from rock music because that would surely lead to illicit sex and illegal drugs. Everyone was to avoid jewelry.

When I became a teenager and started what has turned into a life-long habit of reading theology, I was deeply moved by this impulse for Christians to extract themselves from worldly temptations. Well into young adulthood, I continued to believe that the world was mostly going to hell, that Christians could find God only in the church, and that followers of Jesus should do everything in their power to separate themselves from the world's wild and wicked ways.

In the last few decades I've changed my mind. Yes, I still think there is great evil and sin in the world. Yet I no longer think that the world is without God. I no longer believe the world is entirely evil and the church is entirely good. I no longer picture the ideal church as one that withdraws into a safe castle, raises the drawbridge, and fends off all the wickedness outside the castle walls.

Instead, I now see that God is as deeply involved with the world as with the church. Scripture shows that God's activity is not limited to Israel, God's chosen people; or to

the church, God's created people. The prophets of the Hebrew Bible perceived God's work in international politics. Even though Egypt, Assyria, and Babylonia did not recognize Yahweh, Israel's prophets insisted that God sometimes works through these "pagan" nations.

An astonishing passage that illustrates this is Isaiah 44:28-45:13, where the prophet insists that Cyrus the Great, the founder of Persia (r. 550-529 B.C.E.), is God's "anointed" to be an instrument of God's purposes (45:1,4). Though Cyrus neither worshiped Yahweh nor knew he was acting on behalf of God, Isaiah insists it doesn't matter. God can use Cyrus without Cyrus knowing anything about it (45:4-5). This is a bit like saying God can use rulers of Islamic or Buddhist nations just as easily as rulers of so-called "Christian" nations. The claim verges on being scandalous.

Another astonishing and rarely preached text is Matthew 27:50-54, where "Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last" (v.

50, NRSV). In a footnote the NRSV translators point out that one can translate the Greek as "gave up his spirit" (i.e., "Jesus cried again with a loud voice and gave up his spirit.") This alternate translation opens up

a very different meaning. It implies that while Jesus was alive, the Holy Spirit worked only through him. But now that the Spirit is released, it is loosed to go elsewhere and work in other ways.



So where does the Holy Spirit go? You might think that is obvious: the Holy Spirit falls on the disciples at Pentecost and has remained there with the church ever since. So duh, the Holy Spirit is now in the church.

Not so fast. It's true, of course, that the Spirit is in the church. But remember that the author of Matthew did not write Acts. Instead it is Luke who tells the story of Pentecost where the Holy Spirit falls upon the church

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A Greek verb meaning to see or to perceive, frequently found in the New Testament

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Loosed Upon the World (continued)

like fire. Pentecost as we usually think of it comes from the theology of Luke.

But in Matthew there is no Pentecost such as Luke depicts. Nowhere does Matthew say that after Jesus dies the Holy Spirit enters the disciples, or even re-enters the risen Jesus. Therefore if the Spirit is not in Jesus and not in the disciples, where is it? Where does it go in the gospel of Matthew?

For Matthew there is only one answer: the Holy Spirit is now loosed upon this world. And once loosed upon this world, the Spirit causes unexpected things to happen. The curtain in the temple splits; the earth shakes and rocks shatter; tombs spring open so that formerly dead people walk around Jerusalem; and a hard-bitten Roman army officer confesses faith (Matt. 27:51-54). These events happen because the Spirit that was in Jesus now roams the world. In a sense, Matthew's "Pentecost" is the unleashing of the Spirit from Jesus so it can roam the world.

Ponder that: the Holy Spirit is now out and about in the world, swirling around the globe, doing all sorts of fabulous and amazing things even if we don't see them. In the theology of Matthew, the Spirit has no limits. It goes wherever and does whatever it wants. The church neither controls nor manages the Spirit. For Matthew, the Holy Spirit's home is the whole earth. That includes the church, of course, but the earth is primary. The Holy Spirit has a prerogative to engage everyone and everything the world contains.

Therefore the Spirit is not just at church-owned private schools, but also at city and state-owned public schools. The Spirit is not only doing things in local churches, but also in city councils and mayoral offices.

More broadly, the blessed Holy Spirit is also up to things at Ford Motor Company, Microsoft Corporation, Pricewaterhouse-Coopers, and Royal Dutch Shell. The Spirit breezes through the governments of Iran, Russia, Thailand, Japan, Venezuela, Kenya, and Lesotho. Maybe none of these corporations or governments realize that the Holy Spirit is pulsing through them. But no matter. If God can work through Cyrus the Great, then God also work through Toyota.

This doesn't mean the Holy Spirit is responsible for everything that happens in the world. We human beings are still free to thwart the purposes of the Spirit, and we have a pronounced knack for doing so quite regularly. The Spirit is nonetheless constantly looking for openings to do God's work, scheming how to move events toward justice, peace, and righteousness. The Spirit is inexhaustibly inventive.

This puts the mission of the church in a radically different light. If the Holy Spirit is already loosed upon the world, then our mission cannot be to a godless world for the simple reason that God is already there in the world. No matter where we go, the Spirit has arrived ahead of us. Whether in the Amazon rainforest, the streets of Harlem, or the halls of the Kremlin, the Spirit already has something afoot.

If this is so, then we might sketch four points about our missional stance vis-à-vis the world.

First, we don't save the world. It is God who saves the world, working by the Spirit. The most we can do is to cooperate with the saving work which the Spirit is already doing.

Second, our first work of mission is to watch and listen for the Spirit. When we meet people who profess little to no faith, our first move is to attend for how the Holy Spirit, perhaps unknown to them, is already working in, through, or in spite of them. When we enter an organization that's not Christian, our first move is to notice what the Spirit is already doing in that organization.

Third, once we have a sense for how the Spirit has been working, our next move is to join with those Spirit-led efforts. Our missionary work is to cooperate with the Spirit, keeping our ears and eyes open for new directions the Spirit may be taking.

Fourth, these realizations make us profoundly humble. We do not work in the world arrogantly, but humbly, knowing God arrived before we did and will remain after we leave. Moreover we work gratefully, because the Spirit is loosed upon the world to the end of time (cf. 28:18-20).

Interview about *The Dark Night* Available on the Internet

You can now watch the half-hour interview that I did with Dr. Freda Crews about my new book. Posted at www.timeforhope.com, it will be available for about 8 to 10 weeks. You'll need a high-speed connection to watch.

Dr. Crews is the host of "Time for Hope," a syndicated TV show based in Spartanburg, South Carolina.

