The Spirit’s Birthing of New Visions and New Calls
C-Pentecost, Acts 2:1-21; John 14:8-17, 25-27; 5/15/16
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Sermon-in-a-Sentence: Our sabbatical time is an opportunity for me and for Reconciliation to open ourselves up to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to help us discern God’s vision and call for our life and ministry.

Children’s Sermon: [On flip chart draw a straight line sloping upwards and then a twisted line, winding around but ultimately moving upwards.]

I want us to imagine that here (lower left start of the line) is where we are in our life journey right now; and here (upper right end of line) is where we want to be in the future. This point represents the good, joyful and abundant life we want and God wants for all of us. Which of these best describes the way our lives will probably unfold? Which best illustrates the pathway towards “abundant living”? Let’s ask those people out there, your parents and grandparents, or people the age of your grandparents who’ve had lots of Life experience: Which is it, straight or twisted?

Why is our life journey so twisted and chaotic?

How many of you like pain? Do you think pain is necessary in order to get to a higher level of abundant living? Actually it is. We have to go through difficult and hard times to mature, to grow, to learn how to handle problems and challenges. It’s like working out. If you want to become stronger or faster, you have to work out until your muscles start to hurt, and then your body rebuilds them, a little bigger, a little stronger. Sometimes we have to choose a difficult path, to grow stronger and wiser and to have a better life. That’s part of the reason it looks twisted.

But another reason real Life feels like a twisted path is that we all make mistakes, and make bad choices that get us off track. Look at this spot (circle going backwards). We are going in the opposite direction than we wanted to go. Sometimes we think we need to go in a different direction, or it looks more fun or more cool. Or maybe a friend tempts us to do something we wouldn’t normally do. But if we stop, and listen to our parents, listen to our friends, listen to God speaking through them, then we realize. “Oops, I’m going the wrong way!” We all have to make mistakes and fail at times, in order to learn to solve problems and develop the wisdom and courage to listen for and hear God’s voice.

And sometimes we just get curve balls. Sometimes difficult things happen that we didn’t choose or cause. For example, maybe we just happen to be born into a family that is poor, or lives in a struggling country, or who doesn’t have all the privileges and opportunities other people have. All of those could cause our journey to be more difficult.

All these twists and turns that we have to face can make us feel afraid, hopeless, lost, confused. So what do we do? Open ourselves up to “rebirthings through the Holy Spirit.” What does that mean? Today, Pentecost Sunday, is the day we celebrate the birth of the Church through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Following Jesus had always been confusing and scary for the first disciples, but the scariest, most confusing time was after Jesus had been crucified, and then resurrected and then had gone back to heaven to be with God. Now they felt abandoned and leaderless and afraid and confused. But Jesus had taught them, “Be patient, wait, make room, and I will send the Spirit to comfort, inspire and lead you.” And it happened!

But this was not just a onetime event. This happens over and over in each of our lives and in the life of the Church. We all hit difficult, confusing, scary places. And we don’t know which way to turn or what to do. Everything seems twisted and confused. So what do we do? We remember the story of Pentecost, and we intentionally make time to patiently wait and make room for the Spirit to come.
again to help us rebirth our life journey. When your life feels like this [twisted path], then you need to stop, be quiet, make room, ask God to send the Holy Spirit to help you with wisdom and courage to start over, see things with new eyes, make a fresh start, maybe go in directions you never expected to go.

The Spirit speaks to us in many different ways, sometimes through a dream, sometimes through a friend or stranger, sometimes through an experience. Our job is to listen. We have to learn to listen in all these ways. And that’s how we hear God’s voice and make our way through life towards the wonderful, rich life God wants for each of us.

So next time if feels like you are at this spot or this one (twists and turns) in your life journey, what should you do? Listen for the Holy Spirit. Intentionally listen for God’s voice to guide you. It may come through reading the Bible, listening to your teacher or friend or parents. May even come through a children’s sermon!

**Adult Sermon:**

Today, as we gather to celebrate the birth of the Church, the body of Christ, we also come to celebrate the many rebirthings of the Church, and rebirthings of our own lives, as we have faced major shifts and changes in our world. Our individual lives and our life together as the Body of Christ are ongoing journeys, adventures that God calls us to be a part of so that we, individually and as a faith community, and all of those we seek to serve, can experience more of the abundant life God wants for all of us.

And, as I shared in the Children’s sermon, it is never a simple, straight, or easy journey. We are supposed to follow Jesus, right? Was his life simple and easy?

There will always be times when our life journeys, individually and as a faith community, seem twisted or confused or messed up. That’s when we need to remember Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to birth and to rebirth us, and to rebirth the Church in the face of new and different challenges.

The followers of Jesus had gathered together to listen, to try to discern what they were supposed to do next. Jesus had been resurrected. He was no longer physically present to guide them, to tell them what to do, to point out their blind spots. And, as Jesus had promised, the Holy Spirit came to them, filled them with God’s presence, and pointed the way for the next chapter in their journey as the infant Church.

This is the essence of “Sabbath,” “Shabbat,” or a sabbatical time: When we need direction, inspiration, wisdom, we need to create space, in time and place, and in the depths of our being, to make room for a new outpouring of the Spirit, for a renewal, a rebirthing of our sense of purpose and call.

Every seven days we have a mini “Pentecost,” a Sabbath experience where we individually and as a faith community come together to be still, to feel the Spirit’s presence, to listen for God’s voice in Holy Scripture, in a sermon, in the music, in the breaking of bread, in moments of silence, in the gathering of our family of faith. And then we are “sent out” with God’s blessing, to continue our work and our journey, and sometimes with a new and revived sense of who we are and who we are called to be.

Sometimes we need a longer, deeper Sabbath experience. We need a retreat, or a long vacation, to rest and unload, so we can listen and hear new things that the Spirit is stirring in us and in our faith community.
That’s why I’ve asked for another sabbatical break at the end of my 14th year here at Rec, and that’s why the staff and vestry have granted and our wider community has affirmed, a sabbatical time for me this summer, starting in about 6 weeks.

But this “Sabbatical time” is not just about me or for me in my individual life journey. This is also a “sabbatical time” or “Pentecost opportunity” for our faith community of Reconciliation.

As many of you know, Julie left with my son Seth last Sunday to drive with him back to Boston, and spend a week with him, time with his girlfriend and her family, getting to know his team of community organizers, and his new sense of call. She also needed a break, a “sabbatical” from her hospice work and her daily caregiving of her aging 93 year old mother. A short, but much-needed “sabbatical” for Julie.

But it has also been an intense “sabbatical” experience for me. Because of her absence, I have been reminded over and over how much Julie is an integral part of my daily life, and how much I love her, and how much I miss her when she is away. I will strive to be more intentional about expressing my love and respect for Julie when she returns.

Her sabbatical time away, also gave me a “sabbatical experience.”

This approximately 11 or 12 week sabbatical will give me a rich opportunity to step back, rest, listen for God’s voice, discern what God is calling me to do and pursue in the next chapter of my life and ministry.

And it will also give you and our staff, and our vestry, an opportunity to step out of the “normal routine” when I’m around, to listen to different voices preaching and leading, including Judith who will be our interim rector. You too will have an opportunity to reflect on where we are in our journey as the faith community of Reconciliation, and to listen for the Spirit’s voice and guidance and questions.

If we all take this sabbatical seriously, you will be in a better place, I will be in a better place, we will be in a better place to hear and respond to God’s call.

The kind of rebirthing experience we are seeking and praying for takes time. Remember what it’s like bringing a newborn into the family, into your life as parent? Do you remember how much time it took to tend to a new birth? You can’t have a birthing, we cannot have the kind of rebirthing we are looking for unless we make room, unless we set aside some time and space.

Despite all the wonder and joy of giving birth, the welcoming a new being, of a new vision, is a scary thing! Why? Because new birth or rebirth promises, no, it guarantees change, sometimes radical, earth-shifting change. Wow! This reminds me of Matt and Amy, who most of you know, our former assistant priest, now at St. Marks, who met his wife Amy, here at Rec. Recently Amy birthed twins! Talking about radical, earth-shifting change! And incredible joy and wonder.

If the promise of change, maybe even radical change, doesn’t make you a little anxious, you are not paying attention. Sometimes we are so afraid of change and the stress and adjustments every change requires that we consciously or unconsciously do everything we can to keep it from happening, thus stifling new birth. Or sometimes the anxiety of not knowing, of a long pregnant time, causes people to want to jump ahead to manipulate a quick resolution and end the anxiety of uncertainty, which interferes with a healthy rebirth.

Whenever you mention the word “sabbatical” in a church setting, some people, out of fear and anxiety, immediately assume it means the rector is going to leave, which means major change and
a long transition full of uncertainty. Which is hard and trying, even if you aren’t particularly fond of the rector. And if the rector is someone you love and appreciate, that just fuels the fire of anxiety.

So let me reiterate, this sabbatical is not about me preparing to leave Reconciliation. But it is about us, about you and me, preparing for, doing the groundwork for an intentional, healthy transition, for a rebirthing, a reshaping, remolding of our vision for ministry and for our relationship.

I am committed to continuing as rector for at least a year after I return from sabbatical. And depending on the outcome of the discernment process, we may conclude that my renewed sense of call and your renewed sense of mission are still a good match, and that we should continue in ministry together for another season. Or we may conclude that my renewed sense of call and your renewed sense of mission are no longer a good match and that we could both better fulfill our renewed sense of call and vision by a transition in leadership.

But those are questions and decisions that we do not need to make now, and we are not ready to make. What we need to do now, what we have been graciously given (or given ourselves in a sense), is the opportunity to prepare ourselves, to let this unfold in due time, to let the Spirit be the Spirit and do the work of the Spirit.

I have specifically designed a sabbatical that will give me time for rest, for play, for silence, for deep listening, for new understandings and exploration of missional outreach to neighborhoods, for reconnection with family and for reflecting on all of that and more. My hope and prayer is that all of these things will make time and space for a rich outpouring of the Spirit, so that I may be reborn in my being and in my sense of call and life purpose.

And it is important that you as Reconcilers, and our vestry and staff and lay leaders see this as also a sabbatical for you, for Reconciliation. A time to step back from what’s been “normal” for the past 14 years, or past 7 years, and open your hearts and minds and spirits and listen for the voice of the Spirit speaking to this faith community, calling you to continue the next phase of your journey together, into a new and lively, and at times, scary future.

Come Holy Spirit. Open our hearts and minds to feel your presence and hear your voice, and give us the wisdom and courage to respond. Amen.