

Pentecost 10, Proper 14
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

August 9, 2020
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Clearing Fog

You don't know how stoked I am about the church today, how hopeful I am about its future, and how excited I am about its work.

It's kind of like a moment that Laurie and I shared in the Andes of Ecuador one time in High School. We were somewhere near a 14,000 ft. pass in the mountains, during the rainy season. We were hiking out from a weekend campout, and suddenly the fog moved in. Now I don't mean one of those gentle mists that make Little Mountain a little hazy. This was so thick that we lost our way. We had been through the area many times, but now we were disoriented. We could barely make out our feet, much less the hills around us.

When we admitted our situation, we did the only thing we could think to do besides wait. We prayed. We asked God to lift the fog so we could get our bearings, and I don't know if the wind just happened to blow at the right time in the right way, or if an angel came down with one of those paper hand-held church fans with a shmaltsy picture of Jesus in Gethsemane on one side, only one of more celestial size, to wave in the air over our heads, but the fog lifted just enough to recognize a hillside—and we made our way out. You know, we never got turned around like that again. The experience so seared the lay of the land in our heads that even in other moments of fog, we knew where to go. That kind of fog has a funny, backwards way of helping you find your way.

We see it in Scripture today. In the lesson from Sacred History, Elijah is in a fog. Oh, the going was clear as crystal for a while, with the whole episode on Mt. Carmel, where he called down fire from heaven, restarted the rainy season after 3 and a half years of drought, slew 450 prophets of Baal in front of their benefactor, Queen Jezebel, and declared that the Lord is God! But then the fog set in and he ran. He ran to a cave on Mt. Horeb, the Mountain of the Lord, and hid himself away.

And God shows up and says, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

"Lord, I have worked so hard for you, and I've done all these things, but it just seems that I alone worship you, and, well, it's just not working." He's in a fog. So, God tells him to come out and stand on the mountain. A mighty wind comes through, but God's word is not in the wind. An earthquake shakes the ground, but God's word is not in the earthquake. A consuming fire blazes through, but God's word was not in the fire. Then, the sheer sound of silence, in which God speaks, telling him what he is to do. (And by the way, 7000 faithful people are out there on our side.)

God blows the fog away, and Elijah never forgets it. From there on out in the biblical record, Elijah never falters. He's recognized the mountains, got the lay of the land; he's good now.

In the Gospel lesson for today the disciples are in a fog. Or rather, in a boat, on the Sea of Galilee, in a mighty wind. Like Laurie and me, and Elijah, they didn't seem to be able to make any significant headway. Jesus, on the other hand, has spent the night in prayer. He sees them out there, and he goes striding out over the tumultuous water toward them. Now, that hardly makes it better, because people aren't supposed to be able to do that. And then there's something else. In the Semitic mind, water is always a symbol of chaos. In Genesis, when God creates land and separates the waters from the waters, and dry land is where people live, where we make houses and gardens and cities and such. Bodies of water are portals to that great water below the land in which the Great Serpent, Leviathan, lives, the demon of chaos. The work of humanity is to maintain right relations with one another and with God, who alone can contain the chaos.

So here is this man walking on the water and calming the storm. He's either a ghost, who has descended into chaos and is coming for them, or it is Jesus, who somehow has godly power over the chaotic principle of water! Who is this guy after all? If the fog was thick, it was really thick now! So, Peter (the spokesperson) takes a stab at a prayer in the fog. "If it's you, Jesus, tell me to come to you on the water!"

A brief eye-roll, and a sideways look of disbelief, and Jesus says, "Come."

Peter steps out onto the water—and he actually walks on it for a bit! Look at him! He's walking on the water! He has power over chaos! He is godlike! And of course, the eye of the ego turns to the waters, the ego-trip evaporates and he sinks. "Save me, Lord!" Oh, Peter, spokesperson, symbol of the whole body of my disciples, why did you doubt? And they go back to the boat. And the disciples say, "Truly, this is the Son of God!" OK, the fog is clearing. They've got their bearings. They may forget in the future, but this is one of the anchor points to which they will return. How do we know that? We still tell the story.

For many decades now, the church has been in a fog. We weren't always. Back in the Golden Days of the first centuries, the real threat of the lions in the arena kept the church sharp, ready, strong and brilliant. Its testimony was such that on more than one occasion, we are told, spectators in the arena, on watching the calm with which the Christians met death by lion, jumped over the barrier and died with them in what the Church called baptism by fire. But things changed. The Roman Empire began to crumble from within. The world descends into a fog. Some of the Church Fathers recognize another great truth. The Church has an opportunity to actually form the emerging world order, whatever that will be. One voice rises above the others in this endeavor, a bishop of Rome named Gregory. His leadership, based on St. Benedict's monastic practice, laid the foundations for the Medieval church and society.

For a while the sun shone. Ireland became a land of monks and missionaries. Rome and Constantinople became great centers of church life. But the fog set in again. Kings and Bishops amassed power, and the struggle between crown and mitre diverted the church from its true mission, corrupting church and government alike. An ongoing argument between the Eastern Church and the Western Church finally resulted in divorce—freeing

each side to become more fully who they were, and for a while more, the sun shone. The 11th and 12th centuries saw a flurry of monastic orders, a renewal of the arts and some of the greatest saints the church has ever known.

But the fog set in again. The rise of the middle class began to destabilize the Medieval economic system. The Black Death ravaged Europe for 200 years, killing almost half of Europe. The Church grew powerful and wealthy again—and corrupt. Then Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Church in Wittenberg. The printing press allowed for popular education. City-states became nations and then empires, taking Christian missionaries around the world. The Enlightenment replaced the old Medieval theocracy. The Church became one of the principle pillars of society, establishing order, teaching people how to be good citizens of heaven and earth, and enforcing a divine authority behind that of the civil leaders.

And now the fog is back. The Enlightenment formulated the assumptions on which we built our world-view. It became possible to conceive of a world without a God behind it, making the planet a commodity rather than a temple, and ushering in the Industrial Revolution. The post-modern critique reminds us that there is no such thing as an objective observer. The rule of the Enlightenment is crumbling. The Internet has redefined distance and boundaries in ways that are reshaping society. Since the social upheaval of the 1960's the church's moral authority in society has eroded. Society no longer looks to communities of faith for moral direction in business or politics. Economics no longer has a moral voice calling it to responsibility, as Adam Smith, the Father of Modern Capitalism, originally envisioned. The percentage of people who practice no faith at all, “nones” is growing faster than communities of faith. For the last 60 years the Church has been asking itself, "What are we all about?" Saving souls? Teaching people to be good? Working for a just society? All of these have some truth to them.

And that is why I am so excited. You see, the angel is waving that giant, celestial fan again. Something of a consensus is beginning to manifest itself in the Church and society. Oh, there are the outliers, to be sure, and always will be as there always have, but a conservative estimate puts 60% of the nation behind the ideals of the Black Lives Matter movement. More and more churches are recognizing that the Gospel speaks to more than just the soul of the individual, but to society's structures as well. Whereas just 20 years ago the clergy person was usually the buffoon on TV, now we are seen more as prophets. We are regaining our voice, not on the shoulders of the Church's structures, or the Enlightenment, but something more organic, more akin to the earliest days. We speak and people listen because we have something to say worth hearing. All lives matter: Black, Brown, Female, LGBTQ+, Indigenous, and White. The environment must be given a voice. Integrity in government should be an ideal. Relationships are more important than ideology. These are things that resonate profoundly with the Gospel AND are voices heard in society at large, even among the "nones." As in the days of Gregory, of the saints of the 11th century and the Reformers, the Church must speak.

Theologian Phyllis Tickle (RIP) in her book, *The Great Emergence*, (Tickle, Phyllis. *The great emergence: How Christianity is changing and why*. Baker Books, 2012) shows how the Church emerges from the fog stronger and more faithful than before. God is calling us out of the cave, beyond the sound of the wind, the earthquake and the fire, into the sound of sheer silence that is beyond and behind them, in which we will hear what we are to do. God is calling us out of the boat and onto the chaos around us, beyond the wind and the waves, eyes ever focused on the one who calms them, Jesus. Now is the time to proclaim to the world that God is healing and restoring the world, and that we are recipients of and participants in that healing and restoration.

How are YOU involved?

Meditation questions:

1. What times in your life have you been in a fog?
2. How has God blown the fog away?
3. What did it lead you to do?
4. What might God be calling you to do now?