

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

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A Third Place

From the very beginning, humanity has been plagued by a fundamental existential fear.

I don't know about you, but what is happening in Israel and Palestine fills me with great mixed emotions. On the one hand, Israel is God's people, according to our Old Testament. As God's people, they are called to reveal to the world who God is. They are to treat the stranger and the needy like God treated them, bringing them out of the land of Egypt and the house of bondage, into the light and freedom of the Promised Land.

The nation of Israel was created by other nations to create a homeland for Jews freed from the Holocaust after WWII. They have continually worked to expand the territory they control, sometimes violently expelling Palestinians who have lived in that area since Jesus' time and before. They are breaking my heart.

On the other hand, the Palestinians, descendants of the Samaritans of Jesus' day, were themselves descendants of the Hebrews who were left behind when Babylon carried the important people into exile, back in the 6th century before Christ, mixed with peoples the Babylonians brought in. Their "half-blood" status in the eyes of Jews is hardly their own doing. They have always been the odd man out, the whipping child, relegated to live on the wrong side of the tracks. Their plight breaks my heart.

But for me the real tragedy is the fear that drives it all. Palestinians, without a proper homeland, have become fertile ground for the growth of Hamas, who will not rest until Israel is destroyed. Hezbollah to the north feeds on the same existential fear. Israel, knowing they are a tiny country surrounded by big enemies, depending on foreign military aid, is always a ticking time bomb, convinced that as long as Hamas and Hezbollah are around, their very existence is at stake. Both sides are locked in an existential struggle, both convinced that the earth is not big enough for them both, both unwilling to lay down arms until the other is utterly destroyed.

And of course, the African saying holds true. When elephants fight, the grass gets trampled. The greatest price is being paid by the ones least able to pay it, the civilians, the women, the children, the poor and the dispossessed.

Similar wars have been waged since the dawn of warfare. In today's world we have Ukraine vs. Russia, and North Sudan vs. South Sudan. The wars in South America that are tearing countries apart are a struggle between drug cartels and governments, both set on each other's destruction. El Salvador's model of "Mano Dura," the "Strong Hand" tries to annihilate the gangs. They are lauded around Latin America for the peace

restored to the streets of their cities, but at what cost, when a full 30% of those who have been incarcerated are patently innocent, and judicial procedures and rule of law have been suspended to accomplish it? Ecuador, the land of my birth, is locked in just such a struggle now.

The United States' history is no better. The lines of fear can be traced in our own Declaration of Independence, that to be who Providence has obviously destined us to be, we must break violently from the powers who stand in our way. Our independence was an early harbinger of the ultimate breakup of the British Empire, the largest empire in the history of the western World. The colonizers had reason to fear the war of independence.

Then, whereas we are all aware of the economics of the Civil War, I think there is no room for doubt that existential fear drove its violence. And the price? Half a million American lives lost in the U.S.'s bloodiest war. Almost equal to all our other war casualties combined.

So, when St. Paul describes creation itself as groaning, longing for redemption, I believe he speaks of that great freedom we desire from existential fear. We long for a place free from scapegoats, free from that hideous lie that our wellbeing somehow depends on the ill-being of others. We long deep in our hearts for another place to stand, deeper than "either/or;" more grounded than "they or us."

The good news is that God is pulling for the emergence of this third space, too. The Spirit groans with us, giving voice in ways beyond us, praying for what we cannot even articulate. That groaning yearns for the moment that we open our eyes and see that great truth, that at our own most profound level we are all one, all creation is one, all existence is one, and that the existential fear that drives so much of what we do will be shown for what it is: a shadow, a sham and a con of the evil one.

Pentecost is a celebration of the Spirit, that part of God that groans with us and for us, calling us to that third place, that deeper place of oneness. When you find your heart troubled, when the world is changing too fast, when things seem to be drifting in directions that make you uncomfortable, that sense of unease shows that we are on the growing edge, cast up once again against that existential fear.

When you are tempted to say, "But that's not who I am," "That's not who we are," and it feels like we are being asked for something we cannot give, (when, truth be told, we do not WANT to give, because to give it would be to allow ourselves to be changed, and we're not sure we want to or need to change,) that sense of unease shows that we are on the growing edge, cast up once again against that existential fear that somehow who we are now is mutually exclusive with who we are being called to be; either/or, them or us, the past or the future. Growing edges are never comfortable or easy for they always require the best of us.

The unease we feel is precisely where the Spirit groans with us, but more than just groaning with us, the Spirit urges us forward. *The only true way out of the fear is through it.* So, there is the Spirit, holding our hand as we walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Did not Jesus promise in the Gospel lesson today that the Advocate, the Spirit would lead us into all truth? If we need leading into truth it is clear that we do not yet have the whole truth. There is room to grow, and the Spirit is about growth, growth into the full stature of Christ, the Body of Christ in the world.

Now you know what I am about to say. Here in this space, we are immersed in a living, breathing experiment in growing edges. The evolving relationship between Resurrección and St. Paul's confronts us with the existential fear of living with people who do not share our cultural heritage.

It's easy to love their food and their fiestas, but when the negotiations for power begin to push our buttons, what will we do? The Spirit groans with us, urging us to step back, make space and build common community.

It's easy to have them worship here, but when changes to the worship space are contemplated and we are moved to exclaim, "But that's not who we are!" The Spirit groans with us, urging us to be generous.

When hard questions are asked, and feelings run deep, the Spirit groans with us, urging us to be patient with ourselves and others, and to remain engaged.

Now, I want to "groan with you" on one topic that has come up more than once. People are asking, "If Resurrección and St. Paul's merge, will all our services be bilingual?" According to the canons, the Rector is the one who decides what languages we worship in, and I say no. Say it with me: NO. Again: NO.

I say so because worship should be in the language of the heart. There are monolingual people in both congregations that would lose too much. We do enough bilingual services to celebrate our relationship and to not wear out the priest on high feast days. The worship schedule remains the same. So, say it again. Will there be a change to the worship schedule if we merge? All together: NO. Thank you. Help spread the word to those who are not here today.

The existential fear we feel is felt by everyone, our families, our friends, our neighbors, this town, this state and this nation—the whole world. Can our struggle inspire others to struggle well rather than poorly? Can we help blaze a new way to a third place? Can we groan with people, urging them to reach for inclusion rather than division, for joining rather than dividing, for wholeness rather than disease? This is the struggle of God to heal and restore the world. If we are recipients of that healing and restoration, let us also be participants in it.