

Looking for the Fireworks Within

Pentecost Yr C May 23, 2010

A minister decided that a visual demonstration would add emphasis to his Sunday sermon. Four worms were placed into four separate jars. The first worm was put into a container of alcohol. The second worm was put into a container of cigarette smoke. The third worm was put into a container of chocolate syrup. The fourth worm was put into a container of good clean soil. At the conclusion of the sermon, the Minister reported the following results: The first worm in alcohol- Dead. The second worm in cigarette smoke - Dead. Third worm in chocolate syrup - Dead. Fourth worm in good clean soil - Alive. So the Minister asked the congregation - What did you learn from this demonstration??? Maxine was sitting in the back, quickly raised her hand and said, 'As long as you drink, smoke and eat chocolate, you won't have worms!' That pretty much ended the service.

Today we celebrate the Feast of Pentecost, the day within the Church Year when we focus upon the purpose of the Christian Church and the power given to us to fulfill that purpose. The story in the second chapter of Acts would make a good script for a movie in today's entertainment marketplace. It has lots of special effects with loud, dramatic noises and lots of miraculous, extraordinary things happening. I suppose Arnold Schwarzenegger could play the role of Peter - anytime he walks into a church things get noisy, explosive and exciting very quickly - while Steven Spielberg could design the dramatic effects. But as I thought about it, it occurred to me that loud, noisy, dramatic special effects just have not been my experience of how God shows up. I suspect the writer of the story in Acts has taken a page from Hollywood in his use of narrative pyrotechnics to gain our attention and say, "Look, something powerful and incredible happened in the life of the Christian community following the execution of Jesus.....something that changed our understanding of ourselves and the purpose of our lives." I suspect the drama was inside their skin. I suspect the ear-splitting sound of the Sacred and the fiery images of the Spirit were experienced in the minds and hearts of the first followers of Jesus unseen to those on the outside. I suspect these experiences overcame their fear and confusion to plant seeds of vision and passion; a passion determined to "get out there and change the world."

Passion is not loud and visually spectacular from the outside, but it can be incredibly powerful on the inside. Passion looks a lot like quiet determination; like an unstoppable drive to do some thing, to accomplish some change in one's life and in the world. When God shows up in our lives, it will probably be without Hollywood effects, but with a personal drive, a hushed yearning to change ourselves and the world. Allow me to share a story of what it sounds and looks like when the Sacred breaks into our lives. (December 2, 2009 by Steve Lopez - Los Angeles Times): "On weekday evenings, a white van circles the neighborhood of Lafayette Park west of downtown Los Angeles. At 6:30, the waiting is over. William Correa picks up his two sons at HOLA, or Heart of Los Angeles--a nonprofit after-school program--and drives them home to Paramount. Recently I met Juan, the eldest son, a lean and handsome young man of 15. I was on a tour of HOLA when someone introduced us. He was quiet, polite, painfully shy. Later, I was told that he used to live in the neighborhood and began attending HOLA four or five years ago. Juan got hooked, especially on the art program, and

the HOLA staff got hooked on him. "He's so quiet, but there's an intensity," said Dan McCleary, an accomplished artist who has exhibited extensively and is one of Juan's teachers at HOLA. "And he's phenomenal for his age."

When Juan was about to leave middle school, McCleary suggested he apply to his own alma mater, the private Catholic boys school Loyola High. Juan wasn't sure he could measure up, or perhaps it was something else that gave him pause. His parents are Colombian immigrants, and William Correa's salary as a religious aide at St. Emydius in Lynwood, where he helps parishioners prepare for sacraments, was modest, as was that of his wife, who works as a secretary at the church. Only in a dream could they come up with the tuition to a fine private high school. McCleary wasn't about to give up. Though his own art career had been quite successful, he had never felt entirely fulfilled by it. The young energy and talent at HOLA had reawakened something in him, and he was eager to go to bat for Juan. "I see myself in his quietness," McCleary said. McCleary called Loyola to talk up the boy, and he asked the principal to consider a scholarship for him. It worked, with a catch. The school didn't offer a full scholarship. Juan would still have to pay \$3,000, and his family still couldn't cover it. That's when the staff at HOLA got creative. The staff was determined to get Juan into Loyola, so they asked him to hurry up and start drawing and painting, because his work was good enough to sell. Juan does striking, intricate pencil drawings of people, animals and nature scenes. He quickly completed 30 works of art, which were purchased by volunteers, employees and visitors at \$100 apiece. The \$3,000 got Juan into Loyola. He's now in his sophomore year there, and talking about one day trying for Loyola University, or perhaps Stanford. Juan knows, though, that getting to HOLA day after day has created a hardship for his father. Before Loyola, Juan went to school in the Lynwood parish where his father works. His father would drive him to school in the morning, go to work, then drive him to HOLA in the afternoon. Even after the rent was raised on their apartment and they were forced to move in with relatives in Palmdale, the family wouldn't give up on HOLA. But it meant leaving home at 4:30 a.m. and getting back to Palmdale at 8 p.m. This kind of sacrifice by parents, McCleary says, is the under-told story of the L.A. inner city, a place where the sensational and the tragic are more likely to make the evening news. "Juan was living in the middle of gangland," McCleary said, but he is typical of the many kids from good and decent families. His story is a quiet one, as quiet as Juan himself, and there is no high drama in his father's daily routine. There is only pride and work and yearning."

When the Spirit of God breaks into our lives, the dramatic sights and sounds we experience are those of a changed heart, a quiet determination awakened within us. We move from apathy and detachment to full-body contact and engagement. We move from fear into courage, from hiding into activism. When God breaks into the hearts and minds of a congregation, that congregation begins to care more about its mission and purpose and less about its own wants and desires, more about those outside its membership than themselves. When a congregation opens their eyes to see the Spirit who lives in and through and all around them, they begin to more and more feel driven and determined to collaborate with God in healing its community and the world. Today is the Feast of Pentecost. What is our passion? What do we care about? What are we going to do? AMEN.