

“Secondary Succession”

Courtney Steininger

First Presbyterian Church New Canaan, CT

May 23, 2021

First, a prayer from the world council of churches. Let us pray:

Creator, redeemer, advocate, let us receive, afresh, the promise of the Holy Spirit, renewing us, our times, and the face of the earth.

Spirit of Light, illumine our minds,

Spirit of Love, inflame our hearts,

Spirit of Life, empower our limbs.

Divine Spirit, now and ever, heal and free us to live with the passion and purpose the promise of Pentecost.

Amen.

This morning, our Psalm and Epistle lesson are full of creation imagery. The Psalmist praises God, saying In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.

Paul, in the letter to Romans, keeping in mind this language of the “fruits of the Spirit” acknowledges that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains, waiting for redemption and reconciliation to God.

And this might seem like it is in contrast to our first lesson about the birth of the church in Acts. In that story, we are greeted with violent winds and tongues of fire. Still natural imagery, yes, but imagery of destruction. And this destructive imagery- blood and fire, and smoky mist the text says, is the birthday of the church.

Right, because that’s what we celebrate at Pentecost. The birthday of the Church. I opened with a prayer from the World Council of Churches because it points to this huge network of Christian people that we are a part of, even if we don’t know it. This story is not about individual people becoming Christ’s disciples, but the Christian Church being birthed in community. The very first line of our Acts text is “when the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.” And that’s important. The birth of the church necessarily happened when people were gathered, together. Peter stands with the eleven to proclaim that this was not drunkenness but the Holy Spirit.

And when our confirmands come forward after this sermon to join the church, yes, I am so so so proud of them as individuals. This past year has been hard on everyone, and they have persevered. Veronika, God is your protector, and your acknowledgement of that is so beautiful and deep and I hope you remember that whenever you need protecting. Trey, you are so full of gratitude for all the blessings God has given you, and I pray that you can use that gratitude to do great things in the world.

But when you two stand up here, it is not for them as individuals to become disciples of Christ. Yes, they will be making individual affirmations about what they believe, but confirmation is about joining this community that we are all members of, which means that the spirit is here. The Bible says where two or three are gathered, the spirit too is there. And if the past year has taught us anything, it is that connection does not need to be physical. But as long as we remember each other, care about each other, we are gathered. We are the Church. And the Spirit too is there.

So let's get back to that creation imagery and the destructive imagery. The title of this sermon is "secondary succession," which an astute individual might recognize from a biology, ecology, or environmental science class.

Many different processes establish plant or animal communities in an ecosystem. Wind can blow seeds to new areas. Birds can carry seeds from one area to another. When appropriate food sources exist, new animal populations may thrive in an ecosystem. The process by which communities are established, develop and change in ecosystems is called succession. There are two types of succession. The first is primary succession. Primary succession occurs in an area that has not been previously occupied by a community. Places where primary succession occurs include newly exposed rock areas, sand dunes, and lava flows. Simple species that can tolerate the often-harsh environment become established first. These organisms help enrich the soil, allowing other species to become established. The first organisms to appear in areas of primary succession are often mosses or lichens. These organisms are known as pioneer species because they are the first species present; pioneer species must be hardy and strong, just like human pioneers.

Secondary succession takes place following a major disturbance, such as a fire or flood. Farmland that has been abandoned also can undergo secondary succession. The stages of secondary succession are similar to those of primary succession with one important difference: primary succession always begins on a barren surface, while secondary succession begins in an area that already has soil.

So what does this have to do with the Church? I'm literally having kids draw this process out right now and why? In the Gospels, we see primary Succession. An ecosystem arises around Jesus. His first disciples are those pioneers.

But by the time this Acts story take place, the disciples had been on quite the roller-coaster ride with Jesus. For three years they'd followed him, worked with him, ministered with him. They'd been through an ordeal, watching Jesus be put to death, and then they'd received the joy – Jesus resurrected. But now Jesus had returned to God, and no longer walked the earth in human form with them.

And that's important. Last week's Ascension story feels pretty traumatic. Laura Alary, in the book *Breathe*, talks about the joy of resurrection, writing, "Wild joy sprang up in them. This time, they promised, we will hold onto him and never let go. But Jesus shattered their hopes. Like small children, his friends clung to him, overflowing with questions." For Jesus' disciples, they had just lost Jesus but he was back, and now they are about to lose

him again. This is a major disturbance that ends with Jesus gone, like smoke from a candle, dissolving into thin air. Alary wonders “why Jesus came back to his friends, only to go away again. Why did he get their hopes up? That must have hurt. They must have been afraid.”

And then that major disturbance is matched with a physical counterpart. Secondary succession starts with a major disturbance like fire, or a tornado, or another natural disaster. And we see that at Pentecost.

And then, suddenly, a sound comes like the rush of a violent wind, and it fills the whole place where the disciples were. And Luke, our author, describes to us these “divided tongues,” like flames, resting on each apostle. And all of them are filled with the Holy Spirit and begin speaking in other languages, as the Spirit gives them ability. The Jews in the city, who are from many countries, many places, all hear the disciples speaking in their own language, and they are amazed, dumbfounded, perplexed. Some even wonder if the disciples are drunk. But Peter stands with the rest of the twelve, and raises his voice to address the crowds that have gathered to witness this strange event.

“Let this be known to you, and listen to what I say,” Peter begins. They aren’t drunk, he insists, but instead, they embody the vision of God which the prophet Joel proclaimed: “God declares . . . I will pour out my Spirit upon all your flesh, and your sons and your daughters will prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit.” Past our text for today, Peter continues preaching, talking about Jesus Christ, and people respond to his words. In his message, they catch something of the Spirit that has filled Peter and the other disciples, and Luke says that three thousand people were baptized on that day. Three thousand!

I’d call that the establishment of a new ecosystem. And that ecosystem is the church, growing together as the Body of Christ, in diversity together and loving each other.

Alary’s reflection on Pentecost continues. She writes, “When they felt the Spirit in them, connecting them with Jesus, his friends began to say and do the things Jesus had done. They healed. They welcomed strangers. They shared what they had. They listened and understood. They forgave. They loved with open hearts. The Spirit flowed through them, breathed through them, changed the world through them, sometimes in surprising ways.”

At Pentecost, the disciples finally took everything Jesus had taught them, all the encouragement he’d given them, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, stepped out in front of the crowds to make a bold statement of faith, putting it all on the line. Finally, they had to stop standing behind Jesus, relying on him to answer their questions and tell them what to do, and start acting as his messengers in the world.

What happened on Pentecost is both hard to explain and easy to understand. The disciples, even though they weren’t really ready, became the church. Since Jesus had returned to God, they became the body of Christ in the world. They weren’t ready. They needed to know more. They still didn’t have all the answers. It isn’t long before they get in fights

with each other and stray from what Jesus might have done. But they take the plunge. They take the leap of faith. They can do it, because once they feel the Spirit moving, they know that Jesus is really *always* with them. They aren't alone. When they step out on faith, God is with them.

So what does that mean for us? What will *you* do? God is with you. You aren't alone. So whatever it is you are waiting for to be *ready* to start following God, *really* – remind yourself that we're never ready for everything we'll face. But we can be ready to put our trust in God, who has never failed us yet. Are you ready? Probably not. But let's get started anyway.

You are a part of this great brainforest that is the church.