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James C. Schaap
Dordt University

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Pentecost

Abstract

"How we come to believe... gospel truth is a pilgrimage we all must take very much on our own. One size does not fit all."

Posting about Christian faith from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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in things

June 11, 2019

Pentecost

James Calvin Schaap

Wovoka's dream vision of the end times was so blindingly beautiful that Native tribes throughout the American west met in celebration to dance as he'd taught them, a dance some call "the first truly American religion."

He designed the ritual from visions. Erect a sapling in an open area, then purge yourselves: enter sweat lodges, prostrate yourself before *Wakan Tanka*, the Great Mysterious, and offer yourselves as sacrifice.

Wovoka told them Christ had left earth for heaven when he was rejected by the white man, but that he'd come back to bring the good news of the return of all the beloved old ways. White men called the dance and the religion "the Messiah craze."

Wovoka told them to dance, not to stop until they fell from physical exhaustion and spiritual plenitude, to dance until the mind floats up to the spirit world, dance into frenzy and ecstasy.

Suffering from poverty and desperation created by the violent end of a way of life, Indian people throughout the west gathered to revere the frenetic blend of Christianity, mysticism, and Native ritual that Wovoka promised would bring back the ancestors—hence their name, "the Ghost Dance." Then too, the buffalo would return. A cloud of dust from the new heaven and the new earth would swallow the *wasicu*, the white man, and their own deep hunger would be satiated, their profound despair comforted.

For many, the Ghost Dance was a beautiful thing in a time when there were very few beautiful things.

Years ago, I wrote something like that in a long essay describing what happened at the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890, a horror not all that far from here. Before that essay was published, I wanted a Native friend to read it since it related so much about Native life and culture. I sent it to her—she’s Cherokee and a Christian, a Pentecostal Christian.

She liked the essay and commended it to an editor, but wondered about one line I’d used to define the Ghost Dance. I’d called it “a tragically false religion that played a significant role in what we’ve come to call, simply, Wounded Knee.”

She said, “Jim, why did you call it a ‘false’ religion?”

She was, and is, a deeply committed Christian, but her question rattled me deeply and still does. “Why of course it was “a false religion,” I told myself. “What is she thinking? She knows better.”

But her question comes to mind again when I think about Pentecost—not because the frenzy and tongues of fire Luke records in the book of Acts somehow equate with all-night dancing around a sapling on a reservation. If we consider only the signs and wonders, the physical manifestations, there may seem little difference between them, the Toronto Blessing “holy laughter,” or even more bizarre forms of religious ecstasy.

What we know and believe of the Spirit’s anointing at Pentecost is that what was imparted to the faithful—*and* to us—was blessed comfort from our all-too-real despair. For the disciples, Jesus had left; however, the Holy Spirit, as he’d promised, was our proof positive that we were not and are not left behind. “Through true faith, we can share in Christ and all his benefits,” the Catechism promises of Pentecost; “that very Spirit comforts me and will remain with me forever.”¹

For the disciples’ avid excitement, there were no words—only the utterance of odd languages rising from spiritual plenitude.

Shouldn’t we all be so blessed? Just imagine the B. J. Haan lit with tongues of fire. In the First Church of the Ice Box, am I missing something basic, something moving and fundamental?

The immense elasticity of the Christian faith is borne from the mystery that God, His Son, and the Holy Spirit are very God of very God. We can be sure of two things: that he loves us, and that we don’t know the half of it. How we come to believe that gospel truth is a pilgrimage we all must take very much on our own. One size does not fit all.

Years ago, Joel Nederhood, long-time voice of what was then the *Back-to-God Hour*, told me he knew his own preacherly limits after meeting a woman who said she'd become a Christian believer because she'd seen snow in the Arizona desert. That's all. "Only God could do that," she told him. Thus, she believed.

Or how about this? A Jewish woman once told me she'd converted to Christianity because of Tammy Bakker, a woman with runny eye-shadow, the sometime wife of Jimmy, a TV preacher who found uses for his listener's money that weren't part of the bargain. This Jewish woman told me that story because she was as wonder-struck as I was. Even though she was no longer a Tammy Bakker fan, she wanted me to know that somehow, shockingly, Tammy Bakker had brought her home.

Me? I never spoke in tongues or felt a tongue of flame above my bald head. What's more, I considered Tammy Bakker a fruitcake, and when I saw snow in Arizona, I considered it an oddity but not a miracle.

Still, miraculously and in my own way, I know that my Redeemer liveth.

The Pentecost story can be, for some like me, greatly intimidating—all that super-charged energy in wild-eyed praise of the risen Lord, sheer madness—enough to make some of us question our place on plastic chairs or hard wooden pews. Such great signs and wonders—wouldn't it be great if we could scream about it too, fall prone before his face, exhaust ourselves in holy laughter?

Maybe. Then again, maybe not.

In *Near Unto God*, Abraham Kuyper says that sometimes our individual paths to God become so precious to us that those paths work against the understanding of our own human limitations. We see God in a sunset and think the whole world should visit the Grand Canyon. We find Him in the face of the poor and make sure everyone signs on for a Haiti work trip. We raise our hands to worship and start to believe those who don't wouldn't recognize the Lord if he sat beside them. It's incredibly easy to idolize our own paths to glory and disregard the paths of pilgrimage others take in their own way.

The truth is, God the Father and His Son and the Holy Spirit come to us in a thousand guises: in moments of ecstasy and throes of woe, in coats of many colors, and sackcloth and ashes. We feed on his bread and wine, then again on honey and locusts. Some enter into his gates with thanksgiving, while others are dragged to the throne kicking and screaming.

The gift of the Holy Spirit, which is the truth of the Pentecost, covers all of it and all of us. It's a simple truth which requires a lifetime and more to understand: "God is a spirit and those who worship him do so in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24).

Still, it would be something to see the B. J. Haan lit up with tongues of flame, don't you think?

Then again, sneak in some night in the darkness.

Or simply, as if you were Native, out here on the edge of the plains, observe a dawn. It's really something.

FOOTNOTES

1. Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 20, Q&A 53