

A sermon by
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St. Paul's Episcopal Church

Acts: 2:1-21
Psalm 104:25-35,37
John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

Dear God, take my lips, and speak through them;
take our minds, and think through them;
take our hearts, and set them on fire;
Amen.

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In the beginning, at the creation of all the world, a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. The wind of God, the Spirit of God, the breath of God, breathing into existence the heavens and the earth.

And God saw that it was good.

And the Spirit of God, that wind from God, has been on the move ever since.

The living, vital, world-creating, world-transforming, life-changing Spirit of God. Creating, sustaining, empowering, renewing.

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So it was, at the dawn of time.

So it was, in Jerusalem, lo those many years ago, on the first Pentecost.

And so it is, this Pentecost, this day, in Richmond, Virginia at St. Paul's Church, as we prepare to gather at the font, as we call upon the Holy Spirit, to seal two of God's precious children's in baptism, the sacrament of new birth.

And as we prepare to call upon the Holy Spirit to bless and send (some of) our brothers and sisters overseas, to Africa, in the name of St. Paul's, and in the name of Christ.

And as we prepare to gather at the holy table, to invoke God's blessing on bread and wine, so that we can be nourished by the Body and Blood of Christ.

Yes, the Spirit of the Living God, stirs on Grace Street, and, as it has always been, God's sky is limitless.

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And so, this day, on the Feast of Pentecost, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are sweeping into a six-month period of conversation, reflection, and prayer, a-movement of the Spirit here at St. Paul's, that we are calling, "Such Great Heights."

Together, in the coming months, we will be exploring two essential questions: "Who does God call us to be?" And, "What does God call us to do?"

Answers to these questions have been emerging for quite some time. And we can have faith, and we do have faith, that those answers will continue to emerge in the coming months, as the Spirit of God leads us onward and upward, leads into greater clarity and into action as the Spirit of God leads us to such great heights.

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Always with the understanding that God leads us together, that the Spirit of God has been poured out upon all of us, and that this house is full of the Holy Spirit: as your rector, I will share with you my sense of who God calls us to be, and what God calls us to do, my vision, of where we, together, are going. And I will touch briefly on six themes.

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First and foremost, Worship. I see a day, soon, when we, St. Paul's Church, are as well known for our worship as we are now known for our outreach, and our history. Worship that is fresher, that is yet more, still more, enlivened by a palpable sense of the Spirit, the Presence of God.

And, with worship, as elsewhere, we will go from strength to strength, and grace to grace, building on the beauty and power of the worship that we have now, the music, the preaching, the prayers, the whole experience of worship. This is not about something mediocre or bad needing to be made good. Nor is it merely about what we happen to like. This is about saying, "God, what would you have our worship look like, and be like, and feel like? Show us, dear God!"

Preaching that invites us to see the world and our lives differently than we ever have before; preaching that inspires, encourages, and challenges, leaving us walking out of church saying to ourselves, "How is that I never thought of that before?," preaching that leaves us moved, deeply moved.

Music that moves us in ways that we didn't see coming; music that calls us deeper into worship than we have ever gone before; music and singing that we all feel a part of.

Prayers from the rich trove that is our Book of Common Prayer; and prayers of our own, born up and inspired by the movement of the Spirit of God in our midst.

And I see a new worship service, complementing the three we already have; a fourth service specifically designed to reach out to and welcome our new downtown neighbors, those moving into Shockoe Bottom and elsewhere nearby. A service with its own distinctive character.

I see more of you joining in the splendid, exquisite, inspired ministry of our choirs.

I see the Spirit of God, the wind of God, blowing new, fresh life into our worship of the Living God, here on Grace Street.

Second, Welcoming. At Easter, and on Boy Scout Sunday, we stepped-up our Sunday morning welcome here at St. Paul's. I see that as the beginning of something new and potent and joyful. Smiling, eager, parishioners extending a welcoming hand; inviting people into our midst; and following up in the days after, saying, "Hey, we're so glad you joined us on Grace Street. We'd love for you to come again." "And, what can we tell you about St. Paul's? And, what would you like us to know about you? And, hey, what are you looking for in a faith community? We want to know? We hope we'll see you again soon." I see more, and more of that.

An active, joyful, eager welcome that invites people into our midst. And, an active, joyful, eager welcome that goes out, that extends the invitation out into our community. As we will do with our new, fourth service. And as we did yesterday, with iced tea, and bluegrass, and members of our choirs, singing and welcoming people as they made their way through downtown on the Anthem Stride-Thru-Time Walk. "Hey, we are St. Paul's, and we want to know you. And we hope you'll come join us on a Sunday morning soon."

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Third, Christian Formation. I see a continued development and enrichment of our Christian Formation offerings. Planned well in advance and advertized and communicated well, in a way that draws us and others in. Christian Formation, in the form of small groups and forums, and who knows what else?! Responsive to the needs and hungers, of our hearts, and our-minds. I want our Christian Formation to turn heads, and to turn hearts. I want people to be eager to hear what we are talking about and exploring and-discovering, here on Grace Street. I want it to be contagious.

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Fourth, Faith in Action. What in the past we have called "outreach and mission." Micah and Emmaus; our Carpenters' Kids ministry in Tanzania.

I see us deepening and renewing our engagement in these and other faith-in-action ministries.

And, I'd say, even more importantly: I see us continuing to move even further beyond a sense of obligation, to a sense of joyful, generous, liberating service that flows naturally from our faith leading us into action.

And I see us sending a trip, if not two, a year to Mwitikira, Tanzania, to build relationships and ministry there. I'm planning on going, and I hope you will, too.

I see hearts and minds and lives being changed at the Woodville School, on Church Hill, and in the village schools of Mwitikira, Tanzania; the hearts, and minds and lives of children, and of their parents, and the hearts, and minds and lives of the people of St. Paul's, as well, being forever changed, transformed through those relationships, through faith in action.

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Fifth, Shaping Public Discourse. This is an extension, another expression, of our Faith in Action. That said, I think it demands special attention.

I see us engaging-in and shaping public discourse: the public, civic conversations; the big questions of our day, particularly here locally, in Richmond. Questions of compassion, and of justice.

What do we have to say about, and how do we help Richmond face and deal with, our common life. We are taken back to the root of the word “commonwealth,” commonweal, all that we share in common; the common good.

What do we, as witnesses of the Gospel of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, here in the heart of the City of Richmond, in the Capital of the Commonwealth of Virginia, what do we have to say? About racism, about the living conditions in our jails and prisons, about war, and about peace.

How will help make sure that we leave our city, and our world, better than we found it?

What does the God who took on human flesh and died in the name of love, what does that God expect of us? There is a time to act, and there is a time to speak. What will we say? What do we say, as witnesses of the Gospel?

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Sixth, Generosity. What does it mean to live with generosity? To live generously? To live as God lives, with generosity infusing the whole of our lives?

“Stewardship” is such a tired word, often narrowly associated with money.

I see us enlarging, expanding, growing, deepening, our theology and our way of life, so that we embody more fully in the way that we live the generosity of God’s very own life.

This is about money, yes, but it is about vastly more than that: it is about our whole lives.

If it doesn’t include money, it is a sham. And yet money is only a beginning, only one measure, of the depths to which the Living God has penetrated our souls and our lives.

I see us having the courage, and the faith, and the imagination, to live generously.

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Worship... Welcoming... Christian Formation... Faith in Action... Shaping Public Discourse... Generosity...

And, Other. Or, better yet, and: Surprise.

I see us being *surprised* by what the Spirit of the Living God will lead us into... Wonderfully surprised.

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As you leave today, you will be given a hand-out telling you more about our, “Such Great Heights” movement. After the service today, or sometime during the picnic (before you go home), you are asked to go into the parish hall, where you will see a number of comment boards, inviting you to help answer the questions, “Who is God calling us to be?” and “What is God calling us to do?” These boards, which, on the analogy with “web-logs,” – “blogs,” we are now calling, “parish logs,” – “plogs,” will be up all the way through the summer and into the fall, and they are but one way that you are enthusiastically encouraged to join the movement, the “Such Great Heights” movement, that begins today.

There will be many other opportunities, through forums in the fall, and other smaller gatherings and conversations, and through the “Such Great Heights” website that just went up.

A key component of the process will be teams that will be formed around the areas that I’ve identified today, “Worship,” “Welcoming,” and the rest—and you are hereby invited, and encouraged, to join one of those teams. There will be a vestry advocate standing by each one of the comments boards today. They are there to talk with you about the “Such Great Heights” movement, and they are also ready to sign you up to be on their working team.

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We had initially thought the process would culminate in early November with a big celebration weekend, but we’ve gone ahead and pushed that deeper in November, to give ourselves some more time, to let the Spirit continue to work.

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In the meantime, please pray, and please join in, please join the movement, the movement of the Spirit that we are calling, “Such Great Heights,” for indeed, the Spirit Stirs on Grace Street, and God’s Sky, God’s Sky is Limitless.