



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

God With Skin Day of Pentecost 5232021

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's so good to be with you, Christ Church Cranbrook. So good to be with you in the flesh. For quite a while we've been doing our relationship virtually, so it's so good to be with you.

When I think about this season of Pentecost, I understand that we should celebrate Pentecost, but oftentimes it frightens us. We should celebrate Pentecost, but oftentimes it is frightening. Ghosts frighten us. They are the top villain in horror movies. Ghosts distort themselves and crawl in human form, like an inverted insect on ceilings. Ghosts appear as your ancestor in pain and misery. Ghosts are like parrots and mimic your voice, luring you into scratching and weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In short, when you think about ghosts, you think about horror and evil, but this is not the case with Pentecost. Pentecost, which literally means the number 50, 50 days after Jesus's resurrection, Pentecost displays a good ghost. No, not Casper, the Holy Ghost, who descends upon the scared to death apostles and disciples like us and encourages us to begin the church.

I think there are two key reasons why the Holy Ghost is different from the horrible ghosts. Two key reasons why they're different. First, the Holy Ghost soothes the frightening, the Holy Ghost is an advocate for us in the midst of our anxiety, the Holy Ghost calms us down instead of scares us to death, seeing some kind of inverted human body calling on ceilings.

And Jesus, our good shepherd, knows all about this. Jesus, our good shepherd, knows when we are frightened. When our communal responses sharpen, when we listen for predators, when the sheep are ready to run, Jesus knows all of this. Jesus knows our anxieties for the future, knows our anxieties for now. Jesus knows the accumulation of our anxieties that come from our past.

Jesus knows that life can be so difficult and overwhelming that we even lose the ability to pray. Jesus knows this. Jesus knows we need God to pray. So Jesus says in our gospel today to a huddled group of scared to death disciples, Jesus says, I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. And

we, like that huddled, scared to death bunch of disciples are like a little boy. Frightened in the night, he screams so his mother comes into his room to comfort him. "It's okay," she says to her son, "God is with you." "Even in the dark?" the boy asks. "Yes," his mom says and the little boy responds, "But Mommy, I want someone with skin on. I want someone real. I want someone with skin on. I'm scared to death."

And Jesus says to His frightened disciples, when the spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all truth. Put some skin on those words, Jesus, we too want to say. In our hearts, we say, show me what the truth looks like in a world, such as this. Be practical, Jesus, because if I follow you and your truth, I will lose my life.

I went looking for God with skin on in 1988. I was in seminary and I was given a grant to spend the summer in India. I spent half of the summer in what was then called Bombay now known as Mumbai, working in the Christian children's fund, housed in a Christian social work agency in Dharavi, which is technically the largest slum area in the world. A famous movie was made about Dharavi called *Slumdog Millionaire*. Every day I saw someone dead on the street.

The other half of the summer, I went on pilgrimage in India to see God with skin. For me, that meant going to see Mother Teresa and the work she did feeding the *harijan*, a word that means children of God, a word, which is transformative of the word untouchable. I went looking for God with skin on, as I saw Mother Teresa's team washing mucus and feces off the sick. As I saw the missionaries of charity playing with colicky infants, these were the way she ministered. In her own words, when she was ministering to these people and bodies with feces, she said she was ministering to Christ's body.

I arrived in Calcutta looking for God with skin on, and I was exhausted. My exhaustion deepened, as I saw human horses running through the streets, carrying people, carrying the upper caste. And so I woke up the next morning at 5:00 AM to go to matins or morning prayer and prayed with Mother Teresa. And being in the presence of someone that I considered a rock star, I became anxious as I watched these missionaries of charity, like an ocean wave praying in their blue and white habits, ebbing and flowing in prayer.

And in my seminarian identity, I was trying to figure out how to appear smart. Because I wanted to ask a question of her and I was trying to think of the most appropriate question. And I fumbled with this question at the end of the matins, as Mother Teresa was walking out the door, "What's the most important thing in the spiritual life?" I blurted out. And she responded, "The most important thing in the spiritual life is to pray." She paused. And not just with words. It was not quite the concrete answer that I wanted.

Mother Teresa came to the United States in 1990 and she attended a meeting in Boston. Someone stood up at the end of her talk and asked, "Mother, since

there is a sharp decline in religious vocations, especially in women's orders, can you tell me the secret of why the order of the missionaries of charity continues to grow? Can you clue us in in terms of why you are still growing?" And Mother Teresa responded, "I give them Jesus." "But Mother, I wonder if you offer a certain technique such as requiring the sisters to always wear their habits or - " Mother Theresa interrupted and said, "I give them Jesus." "Yes, Mother, we are all aware of your profound work, but I'm asking about something different, something else." And Mother Teresa finally said, "I give them Jesus. There is nothing else."

I told this story in the Church of the Holy Family in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where I served as a priest. As I did that, I got an email and it was someone who said they were moved by my sermon. She asked in the email, how do I give Jesus? Her question in the email and the questions we all have are really about what our topic is for today. We return to Pentecost. We return to fear and the fear is this. If we want to save our life, we must lose it. And if we lose our life for Jesus's sake, we will find it.

And Jesus told us this. And the strange thing is that Jesus wants us to receive another frightening aspect of God's life, the Holy Ghost, but such reception of the Holy Ghost requires death. The sort of death that looks like baptism. When a priest performs a baptism, she prays that all who are baptized into the death of Jesus Christ may live in the power of His resurrection. And we know any kind of death is frightening, but Jesus informs us that the Holy Ghost is not here to frighten us, but to soothe us into new life, a new way.

Jesus puts it this way. I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away. For if I do not go away, the advocates will not come to you. The Holy Ghost is among us to soothe our anxiety of Jesus going away. The advocate is this support in the social distancing between us and God. The Holy Ghost is different from the horrible ghost because the Holy Ghost soothes us in our needs for practicality and concrete differences. And in our anxieties of knowing that we cannot do this life by ourselves.

And the last reason the Holy Ghost is different from the horrible ghost, is that the Holy Ghost diversifies. And I'll explain what I mean. The Holy Ghost is different from horror movies, because she demands that we look like her. Let me say that again. The Holy Ghost is different from those horrible ghosts because the Holy Ghost demands that we look like her. Not in the horror movie way of mimicry, but in the way of being unity and diversity at the same time. If we fail to understand this different ghost, Pentecost is scary because the Holy Ghost is the one who makes us die and be born again.

Let me explain, again, not in a horror movie kind of way, but in the way that a stranger no longer lives and becomes a friend. That kind of death. The Holy Ghost turns strangers into friends. The Holy Ghost is capable of taking a once

hostile crowd and turn it into a community. That kind of death. Shouldn't we all long for this Holy Ghost? Shouldn't we want and recognize this Holy Ghost among us? Whenever the Holy Ghost is around that, which once seemed impossible, it becomes possible. That's when we know the Holy Ghost is with us.

This is scary, however, in that this means openness to new possibilities. Routines are now questioned and better habits are put in place. And the spirit of truth, the Holy Ghost comes to us and we are naturally changed. We now know what we should do, but find our own spirits struggling against the Holy Spirit. And St. Luke captures this anxiety in the people. When we read from the Book of Acts, Luke captures this anxiety with a twist of humor, all were amazed and perplexed saying to one another, what does all this mean? These people speaking, and they're different languages, but we can all understand. And then someone says, well, they're all drunk.

We should celebrate Pentecost. We should celebrate the Spirit's creation of new possibilities. We should even celebrate the death of the stranger who becomes a friend, the death of a crowd that becomes a community. We should celebrate but often the Spirit's diversification from crowd to community makes us more anxious.

And as I close, I think about the lessons from the differences between the Holy Ghost and the horrible ghost. The horrible ghosts are those who want us to stay afraid, who want us to continue to grasp on to a superficial life, the Holy Ghost, lessens our anxiety by advocating for us. Similar to the 1st of January, the Holy Ghost is in us, causing us to embrace new resolutions, resolutions of turning strangers into friends, resolutions of showing what God looks like with skin on.

The Holy Spirit holds up a mirror to us so that we can see the real horror. We are the ones more scary than ghosts. Our sins, our greed, our jealousy, our abuse of power, et cetera, are really more scary than human bodies crawling on ceilings. The Holy Spirit shows us that we often lack the image of God given freely to us. And instead of showing what God looks like through the Holy Spirit, unity and diversity at the same time, we instead move back to jealousy, sin, greed and abuse of power.

And the Holy Ghost continues to hold up a mirror to us, to make us realize that our own responsibility in cooperating with God is to produce God with skin on. Jesus made the first stab at that by being incarnate, God incarnate. But the Holy Spirit is asking us to be incarnate, to live in God's life as flesh and blood and look like God. Our incarnation is to show to God that we look like God and Jesus's work is to come to us and look human. We are to mirror that miraculous reality. So the Holy Ghost and the little boy who has a need for God with skin on, it's all pointing to us. We have skin on him. And the work for us is to show God with our skin.