In the words of John O’Donohue, *“Let us praise the grace and risk of fire”.*

One of my very favorite movies of all time is *The Princess Bride*. It is a timeless gem of comedy and a brilliant Robin Hood-like spoof of medieval pageantry and peasantry. One of my favorite characters is a slimy, scheming fellow named Vinizi who is forever calling events that unfold “inconceivable”! In truth, the majority of the time the “inconceivable” does indeed happen with true conceivability. At one point Inigo Montoya, played by Mandy Patinkin says to Vinizi, *“You use that word a lot. I don’t think it means what you think it means.”*

I have to confess that I did not get up at the crack of dawn to watch the contemporary royal pageantry yesterday morning. I did tune in just in time to see Megan and Harry exchange rings and be declared married in the eyes of God and the millions of people watching around the world. What I did want to see though was The Most Reverend Michael Curry and I did view the YouTube recording of his sermon later in the day.

I’ll get to that in a minute, but first I want to tell you about something else that caught my attention. One of my seminary colleagues commented on Facebook that she thought that the BBC commentators missed the mark when they remarked on PB Curry’s *“address that was almost a sermon”!* Really….”almost a sermon”!! My friend declared, and I agreed with her, that perhaps the word “sermon” does not mean what the commentators think it does.

I suppose for those who might never have witnessed Bishop Curry preach before that his style might have been a bit different than they would have expected. It’s also my experience that wedding homilies can oft-times resemble an address or story about the couple being joined, more than a reflection of the power of commitment and love exemplified by a loving God; a love and committment that through the Holy Spirit moves well beyond the joy and love two people share. But I believe Harry and Megan knew exactly whom it was that they had asked to preach at their nuptials. Well, our PB definitely did his very best to shake up the sweet, sweet spirit in the chapel at Windsor Castle and to exemplify that *“it is not the job of the preacher to give the people only what they think they want.”*[[1]](#footnote-1)

I think it’s interesting that when Jesus describes the Paraclete, as the Greek word in John we see today translated as the *Advocate* or sometimes *Comforter*, we might think of a soothing presence that is being sent. After all, the disciples are likely feeling distressed, abandoned, unmoored; a little comfort and soothing might be just what the doctor ordered. Just stay indoors and lay low. It’s safest that way.

But looking at the other scripture readings today, there is considerable movement taking place. At first, the Spirit described in Romans looks to be there solely as our helper in weakness, propping us up, interceding for us, deeply knowing us in ways cannot even be voiced. All of that is truly welcome, but let us not ignore the labor pains of all creation to which the Spirit is present and attends to along side us.

Over and over this week I have been tuned in to hearing words about birth, midwives, bringing life into the world. It seemed like the metaphor was so everywhere in what I read, listened to, and in nearly every conversation I took part in. It caused me to go back and view a TED talk by Dr. Brene Brown, a clinical psychologist. In her talk she tells about coming back to church after having, what she affectionately calls a “small breakdown”, or what her counselor calls a “spiritual awakening”. She says this, *“I went to church to find comfort. Instead what I found was challenge. Church was not an epidural, it was a midwife. It just stood next to me and said, ‘Push, it’s supposed to hurt a bit’.”*

I am not a parent. I have never given birth. But I don’t believe any of us are required to have gone through childbirth in order to understand that the process is not without pain or distress or anxiety. Birth is a messy affair. Births are rarely neat, tidy, or quiet, whether it’s a human being or something amazing waiting to be born. What Jesus has been telling us is that the Spirit, our Advocate and Companion, is here to urge us on, to be the midwife to his church. We, the church, each one of us, are called to participate in the birthing of the kingdom, or perhaps, more appropriately, the kin-dom of God, and it won’t be easy or comfortable.

This is a journey of patience and anticipation. It requires sacrifice and accepting help from others. It requires learning how to do what we have done before, and in different and creative ways. It presents challenges to what we think we know, and shows us a life in Christ we could never have imagined.

But here’s the thing about giving birth I do know; once the process starts, there is no stopping it. It will be very hard once the transformation starts to take place from conception to new life in Christ to avert our eyes from injustice.

We will not be able to stand silent as our sisters and brothers are persecuted and dishonored for their faith or skin color or ethnicity. We will not allow hunger and poverty to be hidden from view. We will raise the questions to which there are no easy answers and we will seek to understand more than to be understood. We will not hide from the truth that is revealed to us, no matter how much we want to stay in our place of familiarity and comfort. It is the voice of the Spirit that urges us on – *“Push, it’s supposed to hurt a bit.”*

Now I was originally thinking I would entitle this sermon “Holy Drunks Playing With Fire”. Yes, that’s just my sense of humor, but I’ll admit, it was kind of hard for me to ignore the reference to the disciples’ speaking in languages not their own as examples of public intoxication. How else could those who heard them explain the *inconceivable*? I liked how one reference I read spoke, not of the disciples speaking in tongues, but of the listeners *“hearing in tongues”.*

In Acts, the Holy Spirit that comes to inflame the small band of Jesus’ followers, is not described as Comforter, or Soother, but comes as violent wind and with the cleansing fire of passion for the Creator; a passion that outpours from their hearts, that cannot be contained within the old wineskins of reticence and uncertainty and the timidity of safe and silent places. When we are crying out, or more likely in our case, singing, “Come Holy Spirit, our souls inspire”, we might indeed find ourselves playing with fire.

Writer Annie Dillard wonders aloud if we actually have any idea of the awesomeness and potential of the Spirit.

*“Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? ……..It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.”*

I think there were many in that wedding ceremony and watching on television yesterday morning as Michael Curry preached the gospel of the love of God that thought they might need crash helmets or life preservers!

Yet if we know anything, we know that the wind of the Spirit blows where it wills, we know that there is nothing that we can do to predict or restrict the movement of the Spirit, and that God, like the birth of something new, is good, but not safe, and certainly not predictable. The ecstatic performance of the Spirit in the men and women present at that first Pentecost for the infant Church burst forth in God’s transformative potential for all flesh, for the whole world. It is ***this church,*** a church that lives on here at All Saints, that was created to be a vehicle of unselfish, sacrificial, redemptive love that changes lives, and as Bishop Curry declared, *“It can change this world.”*

I’d like to quote again from John O’Donohue’s blessing, *In Praise of Fire*…

*…As fire cleanses dross,*

*May the flame of passion*

*Burn away what is false.*

*As short as the time*

*From spark to flame,*

*So brief may the distance be*

*Between heart and being.*

*May we discover*

*Beneath our fear*

*Embers of anger*

*To kindle justice.*

*May courage*

*Cause our lives to flame,*

*In the name of the Fire,*

*And the Flame,*

*And the Light.”* Amen.

1. Thanks Shelly Kesselman! (paraphrased) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)