

## **Pentecost: Life out of the graveyards**

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, May 31, 2009.*

This sermon is brought to you by the letter S, and by the numbers 6 and 2.

Happy birthday to Sesame Street! Big Bird is 40 years old this month. So are Oscar the Grouch, Grover, Ernie and Bert, and a whole host of furry creatures who live on a certain street in a neighborhood a lot like Over-the-Rhine. Their birthday year is 1969. You may recall some events of the prior year that conceived this improbable dream. In 1968, North Vietnam launched the Tet Offensive, U.S. soldiers massacred a whole village named My Lai, and anti-war protests went ballistic. The Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia and put an end to its liberal experiment. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. So was Robert F. Kennedy. Race riots broke out in more than 60 cities in the U.S. over the “Long Hot Summer.” Out of the graveyard of that horrendous year of fear and rage sprang a revolutionary television show that affirms and celebrates a new vision of America, and then brought that vision to life.

Sesame Street taught millions of toddlers and preschool children how to read and count. But perhaps its most important contribution to American society was its social vision as it portrayed American life. Its producers’ response to the nightmares of 1968 was a low-income urban neighborhood where garbage cans sit on the sidewalks by the front doors of the tenement buildings. And here, side by side with the furry monsters like Big Bird, black and white children live and play together, making friends with all sorts of characters, like Oscar the Grouch, who lives in the garbage can. The idea of such a happy multiracial neighborhood was so new—and to some, so offensive—that at one point, the show was banned in Mississippi until the press found out. It is hard to imagine, these days, that a children’s educational TV show that teaches numbers and the alphabet would be so radical. Such is the legacy of Sesame Street, that its insistence on this vision of America now lets us take it for granted. Martin Luther King dreamed the dream, and Sesame Street brought it to life. Someone wrote that Sesame Street changed the world, one letter at a time. “God declares that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your young men shall see vision, and your old men shall dream dreams.”

And happy birthday to the Church! Going back a couple of thousand years, a similar atmosphere of fear and uncertainty and rage sits heavily on Jerusalem on Pentecost one day. With the Roman occupation, soldiers are everywhere. High taxes, oppressive laws cause social unrest and dangerous anti-Roman protests. The city is full of revolutionaries, popular uprisings happen frequently, led by the messiah-of-the-month, and in the middle of all this, a controversial and charismatic prophetic figure was just executed and then rumored to have risen from the dead. And then, out of the graveyard of *this* horrendous time of fear and rage springs what will become the Church, the Body of Christ. In preparation for this time, Jesus had told his disciples, “When the Advocate comes, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.” And so the

disciples testify to all who hear them, and Jesus' promise becomes a reality. When, like the house of Israel, we may look around us and think, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost," God says to us, "I will open up your graves, and I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live."

*Where are our graves?* In our world and our lives, what are the graves that bury us? What are the dry bones in our lives—perhaps failed relationships, or buried resentments, or dead love? Maybe you look around you and feel that your hope for the future is dead—killed by cynicism or by anxiety about your retirement or by the fear of violence. Maybe you wake up one day and realize with a heavy heart that things you thought you believed in, or the way you have lived, no longer feed you. Or maybe, like that vast multitude of fleshed bones when there was no breath yet in them, you have summoned up, from all the vast resources of your life experiences and skills, a burning desire to serve but don't yet know how to bring that longing to life.

The people from every nation under heaven heard the twelve disciples speaking in their own native language when the Holy Spirit came into the room. The Spirit—that's the "S" that brings you this sermon—the Holy Spirit opens eyes and ears to help us see and hear new possibilities and to entertain new realities other than the one we are so familiar with, in front of us.

Can we hear what the Spirit is saying to us? Look at the promise of God who says, "I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live." With God's Holy Spirit planted within us, how can we be timid? Maybe it is time for us to be bold in the Spirit and not be afraid to dream big dreams and to imagine bold visions of what we can do to lift up our community and our city, those who are poor and need our help. As Dean Diamond said not too long ago, in these scary economic times, this church has an abundance of resources by which to dream big dreams. Now is not the time to be afraid, or to hold back, or to hoard what we have so much of, when we can do so much to help those around us who have so little. With the Spirit empowering us, we can enable dreaming, and we need to bring other people to the place where they too can dream because they are no longer wondering about where they will stay tonight to get out of the rain, or what they will eat when they wake up, or how they can get their clothes clean.

Today we will confirm from this Cathedral 6 persons, and receive 2 persons into this Communion (these are the numbers 6 and 2 that brought you this sermon). With the laying of hands on their heads by the Bishop, they will renew their commitment to Christ and will be sent forth in the power of the Spirit to perform whatever service that God has set before them. I invite you to come this afternoon and be part of this commitment. Then may we all be empowered to dream dreams and to hear what God is calling us to be and to do. And with the Spirit that renews and transforms us, we can go out into the world and renew the face of the earth—one dream and one number at a time.