



First United Church of Oak Park

In the Spirit, I Was Carried Away

Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

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I hope we will sit together in three stories today. Three stories about the Holy Spirit. Three stories about the Holy Spirit entering in and forging connection. One is witness. One is tradition. One is invitation. Three strong elements of our Christian practice.

The first story comes from my work as a hospital chaplain. I was on-call that day, the only chaplain available in the entire hospital. The pager vibrated in my pocket, accompanied by the foulest sound. A nurse from one of our Intensive Care Units paged me. "Can you come pray with the family in 1069? Patient is not doing well and they might need extra support." Heading from my office up to the 10th floor, I prayed. I wondered about this patient. What was she like? What might she be leaving behind? Who are her people? What memories will they have of her?

When I arrived to the room, I saw two people at the patient's bedside. They were fervently praying. Her feet and hands were anointed with oil. They whispered scripture in her ear. Praise music sounded from the cell phone placed on her pillow. Her favorite scriptures were scrawled on paper, hung up around the room and on the windows. This patient was surrounded. Enveloped.

I introduced myself. "Hi, I'm Ally, one of the chaplains here at the hospital. I'm here to pray with you." Her family, who I had never met before, welcomed me. I stood near the foot of her bed, hands laced at my chest, opened in prayer. Her family never broke their praise, never fell silent. They called out to God, praying for healing. After a time, the nurse came in. She communicated to me with her eyes that she needed to speak to the patient's family. I nodded my understanding and moved to the patient's son... he was right next to the bed, so close to her. I said, "Your nurse needs to speak with you. I'll stay here by her side and pray." He nodded his head and we traded places.

In that moment, the Spirit entered in and forged connection. I was called into a place I did not quite recognize. His story was not my own. His grief was not my grief. Tears were born from his lifetime of memories. Blessing was poured from his vial of oil. This was not my story. Yet by the invitation of the spirit, it became my story. Through the connection forged by the Holy Spirit, I entered into his grief. Everything that seemed unfamiliar at first became familiar. Guided by instinct, I caressed her hands. As her son did, I whispered my prayers of praise and blessing... "God of comfort, God of peace..., God of comfort, God of peace..."

Between strangers, the Spirit entered in and forged connection.

The second story comes from our faith tradition. It's the story found in the book of Revelation. The author of the text introduces himself: John. John begins by addressing 7 churches. He tells them about his visions of Jesus, who instructs him to tell everyone about his experience, about this conversation. So that is what John does. He assesses and critiques all of those 7 churches, offering them direction and guidance. John's most lofty task, however, is to describe the future of the world, its catastrophic end. So that is what John does. He

tells a story of approaching the throne of God and witnessing a scroll. The scroll is bound with 7 seals and can only be opened by someone who is worthy. John reminds the reader that that person is Jesus, the Lamb.

The Lamb takes the scroll and opens it, seal by seal. After each, there is destruction on the earth: the sun goes dark, stars fall from the sky, more disasters, all ending in a period of silence. Out of the great silence, another set of 7 disasters comes to pass: natural disasters, calamity, torture, suffering. Then the ultimate false prophet comes. Wrath is poured out over the earth: more disease, more misery, more death. Approaching the end, a great city is destroyed. After this, after all this, Christ arrives in victory against the false prophet. Those who have aided that prophet are cast astray. In John's story, this is where the Holy Spirit arrives: ushering in a vision for a new heaven and a new earth.

The apocalyptic story found in Revelation is rich with symbol, metaphor, and meaning to be made. It has been handed down to us, generation after generation. In its origin, it was penned to provide hope to the suffering and the marginalized. To testify to the power of the spirit to make all things new. Our Christian tradition, with its many flaws, preserves stories of life triumphing over death.

What our text helps us notice today is this: the Holy Spirit breaks into human suffering and despair and does not hold back: it forges connection. The vision set forth by the Holy Spirit about God's impact on the human story is remarkable. A breath of fresh air after being underwater. The Spirit forges a way for ultimate connection: we hear a story of reconciliation of all people across faith traditions, the light of God brighter than any light we know, nations and rulers following the ways of God rather than seeking their own aims. The Spirit sets the stage for no walls keeping anyone out, no walls keeping anyone confined, a space with only the good things.

The Spirit breaking in to the story of Revelation invites us to imagine clean water, lush vegetation, a rich plenty of food available for all, healing among nations. The gospel of love, peace, and connection reign true. This is how the Spirit broke in through the text in Revelation. This story is a witness, carried by the cloud of witnesses gone before us, testifying to the Holy Spirit breaking in to a story, forging connection.

The third story I want to call us toward today is our story. The story of First United Church of Oak Park. I have journeyed alongside this community as a Deacon for two years, and prayed in our pews for 7 years before that. In our work, Deacons have heard stories of our community's disconnection and confusion. We have heard your deep longings for the world. Your great desires for your families. Your grief at senseless violence. We have witnessed your wonderings about the path forward.

Deacons have prayed with you for your commitments to justice and equity. Your losses and celebrations. Deacons have prayed alongside you in moments when the world felt too great, too large, when it felt like everything was spinning. As caregivers, prayers, and tenders of spirit, Deacons have held the tension that has emerged around conference tables or between parking spaces. We have aimed to be alongside this community through its transitions and changes.

These realities exist in our community within these walls and in the lives we lead outside this place that we carry with us every time we come through the doors. Dear ones, I am not telling you anything you don't know. We are a broken people, made lovely by the grace of God.

With much less fire and brimstone than the story in Revelation, we are a people situated among chaos. Among change. Among transition. On Sunday June 23, the Pastoral Nominating Committee's candidate for Lead Pastor will be at First United. Following the service, there will be a Congregational Meeting to vote on

calling the minister to leadership in our faith community. We have done a lot of work as a congregation to prepare for this moment. We have shared conversation, heartbreak, and grief. Our teams and committees have done tremendous discernment around their work and purpose. We have examined our finances, our missional commitments, interrogated our values. We have listened to one another's stories as best we are able. I trust that we have shown one another grace and forgiveness.

I believe we have done our best to turn toward one another in love. This congregation celebrated gatherings around tables for a meal in Centennial Hall. We have served each other communion. Laughed together, sang together. This work matters: I honor all that we have done and the ways will continue to do the labor of making a healthy church. We have done the imperfect work of the world, made our way through chaos, transition, and confusion the best ways we are able. What we need to claim today, in this moment, is that this is all work of the Holy Spirit: entering in and forging connection.

The Holy Spirit has promised to break into chaos, into human longing for fullness, creating space for even wider dreams. Beloveds, I urge you today to prayer. To communion. To praise. To silence. To service. To curiosity. To questions. Invite the Holy Spirit into your chaos, your moments of transition and change.

The Holy Spirit has promised to break in and forge connection. The Spirit that does this is the same Spirit that calls us into the unknown, calls us to pursue the unrecognizable. Be carried away in the Spirit: tell one another your stories of hope. Ask one another, "where have you seen the Spirit stirring lately?" The Holy Spirit enters in to forge connection.

Celebrate, First United. This is the good news: the Holy Spirit is calling us into something unrecognizable... bear witness, root yourself in resurrection, and tell each other about it. Amen.