

# Pentecost

## FROM FEAR TO FORGIVENESS

John 20:19-23

## Pentecost

## Analysis by James Squire

19When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 20After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

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## DIAGNOSIS: Boxed In

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** – *Dark Night*

It is evening outside, the time when it is easier for the unsavory elements in the world to operate. Conscientious folk stay inside behind locked doors as a defense against the night. Naturally, we take that time to sleep, snug and safe in our beds behind locked doors.

It is sinful outside. Nighttime is part of the natural cycle of life, but it provides a decent metaphor for sin. If we did operate outside in the dark, sooner or later, people would think we were up to something. Some people work the night shift, but

they usually work inside in the light. And those who are authorized to work outside-police, firefighters, and others-protect us against the possible ravages of the night. But ultimately sin is the thing we need protection from. If we can just stay inside, we may be able to remain safe against the enemy – the one who lurks outside in the night.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Misplaced Fear***

It is evening inside too. For one thing, the unsavory element sometimes succeeds in breaking through our locked doors, bringing the dangerous night into our safe haven. More importantly, unsavory things have been known to happen inside, perpetrated by those who reside inside, as if the dangerous night has already infiltrated the safe haven without requiring trespass. Where is the safe haven when the evil is inside?

That is the problem with our attempts to avoid sin: it has already infiltrated our hearts. To make matters worse, the very fact that we focus our fear on the outside points to our problem on the inside: We fear the wrong thing. The disciples feared the authorities who opposed Jesus, as if those authorities had won the day. Likewise, while we fear vandals, we also fear our boss, our landlord, our parents, and many other “authorities” in our life. We never think to fear Jesus, whose Father in heaven – our Creator – is the ultimate authority over all earthly authorities. If Jesus has lost, as the disciples feared that evening, then behind those who won stands that ultimate authority, and He is the one we should be fearing.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Lost Peace***

Ultimately, we already embody the evil we fear will get inside. Our fear, like the disciples', shows who or what we respect more than anything or anyone else. So we incur the wrath of the one who said, “Thou shalt have no other gods besides me.” To have the maker of all that exists as our enemy means there is no safe

haven for us, nowhere we can hide from him and feel safe. As long as we kid ourselves and think that we can protect ourselves from the enemy, we will persist in our evil and be marked for extermination.

## **PROGNOSIS: Springing Forth**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Peace Finds Us***

Into the midst of the disciples' gloom comes their resurrected Savior, all the same. Resurrection happened without their help. It was a gift from God, a return to their intimate connection with their Master. To make it concrete and solid, Jesus appeared with his crucifixion wounds still intact. It was really him: body, soul, and all. But more importantly, the Jewish authorities hadn't won after all. The cause was not dead, it was alive and well in Jesus. They did not understand yet, but Jesus had intervened on their behalf, NOT against "the Jews," but against the righteous wrath and judgment of his own Father! That judgment had spent itself on Jesus, presuming to destroy him on the Cross. When he nevertheless emerged from the tomb alive in his body, judgment and wrath had nothing left to inflict. He outlasted them. There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, as Paul would write later. God was with them again, in Christ, and instead of wrath and judgment, there was peace. It would never leave them again.

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Peace Heals Fear***

That peace is the kind that washes over you unbidden. The sin in us no longer has any support structure. It cannot appeal to the law as a multiplier of sin anymore. It cannot use the law's condemnation to turn us against Christ, because that condemnation no longer exists for us. The disciples still had something to learn from Jesus, but they no longer had anything to fear from "the Jews." Jesus had introduced them to a bigger

fear – himself – and then immediately took that fear away by giving them his peace, which belongs also to his Father in heaven. As John tells it, the rejoicing did not start immediately with Jesus' appearance. Peter, for one, had great reason to fear Jesus' reproach, having denied him in the courtyard. But now, with Jesus' raised from the dead, Peter could fear (and love and trust) the proper authority-and for the right reasons. When Jesus showed Peter and the other disciples his wounds, then their fear was replaced by a lasting peace.

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Peace Lights the Darkness***

And then they were sent: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." With that, he gave them the Holy Spirit, the one he had described as the Advocate (John 16:7-11) who would prove the world wrong. What did he send them out to do? "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Forgiving sins is their assignment. Jesus hands us the keys to the kingdom, expecting us to forgive but acknowledging that we might retain them. (Could Jesus saying that circumstances may require us to retain sins, or could he be suggesting that if we "retain sin" we are failing to forgive because we hold onto sin-against his wishes?) What a risky proposition, to put forgiveness of sins in the hands of flawed, capricious human beings and expect them to get it done! They might spread the Good News only to their friends. Surely, this would not include "the Jews" whom they had feared, would it? The many "devout Jews from every land" (today's first lesson, Acts 2:5) who heard Peter's message and believed would contest that assumption. Note also that Luke reports they were "cut to the heart" (Acts 2:37). Apparently, when we are sent out, we are to infiltrate the locked rooms of others just like Jesus did, and when we bring the peace of Christ into their fear-filled chambers, they too may be cut to the heart, as the disciples

certainly were in our text. The risen Christ comes into all the nooks and crannies of the sinful world we live in, through us, saying "Peace be with you." To believe it is risky, but is there anything else known to humanity that can uncover your fear and dispose of it at the same time? Such is the radical peace of Christ, a gift too good to retain for ourselves. We must give it to others.