

Acts 2:1-4; Romans 8:14-39

Ten days ago was Ascension Day, when the resurrected Jesus left his disciples again, this time for good. But they were not to feel abandoned, as they had when he was crucified, because God was going to send them the Holy Spirit to abide with them--within and among them--forever. Today, Pentecost, is the day on which the Holy Spirit descended and transformed a tiny group of Jesus-followers into the Church. The first thing the Spirit does is to empower the disciples to speak in the languages of other people--a reaching out, connecting with others in their own ground. It is a powerful beginning to God's project of renewing human community--a multilingual, multicultural community.

In today's reading from the letter to the Romans, Paul is thinking about the work of the Spirit in bringing about the reign of God in its fullness, which starts with this renewed human community. There's such a huge distance between the current reality and the vision--he wants to help the Romans see their way forward AND have the heart to persevere, because those who imitate Jesus inevitably incur suffering; the world as it is operates by a different logic than Jesus does.

So he starts by telling them that being led by the Spirit is becoming heirs of God. They are not slaves--like the Hebrews who spent 40 years in the wilderness wishing they could go back to Egypt because it was the only thing they knew--they are family members. They're adopted into Christ's family. They suffer, but they're suffering after the model that Christ set, and with the same expectation--that glory will follow.

Now Paul expands the scope of his subject, beyond human community to the situation of the whole creation. It has been in bondage to decay. Why? maybe Paul is thinking of the

second creation story in Genesis, in which the human beings are assigned stewardship of the earth and then immediately follow their own designs and ultimately get expelled. (You had one job . . .) We have neglected our stewardship because we were wrapped up in sin. The Creation is anticipating the revelation of God's children when, as heirs, we remember to act like stewards again and relieve the suffering of nature. Paul puts a lot of weight on Christians becoming transformed by the Holy Spirit. In his view, when we realize who we are (heirs of God with Christ), we will work in the world to restructure the things that accomplish sin and death in the world.

This is super-hard, though. First you have to have the vision, which Paul's been trying to transmit. Then you have to be persistent, because your efforts *will not pay off* soon enough to feel good or to know you did it right. This is why Paul says these amazing things which, if I were to get a tattoo, would be what I would get: 1) Verse 28: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." That is to say, ultimately God turns everything to good use. Ultimately nothing is beyond God's power to redeem. And 2) Verses 31-39, which would be a really long tattoo, but these parts are critical: 31 "What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³⁵Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Boom. No notes. Remember who you are, number one, and number two, we cannot fail.

And number three, implicit: there is way more going on here than any of us can imagine. Verse 26: "We do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." We don't even have language for what is on our hearts and in God's vision, but the Holy Spirit bridges that gap too.

There is a Jewish tradition that says, "En od" (sp?), "There is nothing more than God." God is everywhere and everything. The structures that we create or perceive are like holograms. You change your angle of sight, and you realize they're not *really* there as separate entities. Everything is one Godly thing. This tradition says that although Adam *was* appointed to name everything, when we try to separate the world out into discrete parts (through language and naming) we do harm to the whole. It is through sighs too deep for words, through music, through art that we approach awareness of God.

So this brings me to some thoughts about scale. Paul, for all his brilliance, was gesturing toward something beyond language, beyond comprehension. In a recent interview, Paul Enns, a Baptist minister and Biblical scholar, co-host of "The Bible for Normal People," said this:

The Bible [and the NT] tells a very limited story that is shaped around a particular cultural moment of Second Temple, first-century Judaism. They thought about the universe in certain ways, they thought about the nature of reality in certain ways. A lot of time has passed, and now we have a universe that is incomprehensible. The writer of Psalm 19 says 'The heavens declare the glory of God' which is easy if you have a dome over your head and some lights up there, but for us there's no 'up.' There's no center. Everything is the center of the universe because it's still expanding. No matter where you are, everything's moving away from you. . . .

And then you make pronouncements about what God is like and what God isn't like. I stopped thinking a good long time ago that God [is] up there looking down. I know we talk like that. Even in our scientific age we look up at the sky and are just amazed, it's so expansive, so that must be where God is, and that's fine with me when people say that, but serious theologians can't. Serious theologians who are trying to work through our understanding of the nature of reality and how it connects to our faith--we can't leave it there. It's not an accurate description of physical reality. There's much more to it than that.ⁱ

And Enns goes on to say that this has led him to panentheism, the conviction that God is in everything. *En od*, there is nothing more than God. The rabbis in antiquity may have thought the sky was a dome, but they already knew God is in everything.

Dale Allison, professor of NT at Princeton, whose book *Encountering Mystery* I highly recommend, remembers his father, who fought in World War 2 as an enlisted man, and did not know all of what the war was about until he came home and read about it.

In the midst of battle, ignorance and confusion governed. Knowledge consisted of concrete imperatives: go left, retreat, hold your fire, cross the bridge, walk the road, take the town. How his deeds furthered some master plan he knew not: there was for him no big picture. My father could not see the forest because he was a tree. He just followed orders and tried to stay alive. Those of us who are religious are like my father. We know that we are in a war [giant process] but not how it goes or how it will eventuate; and few of us are generals. Our lot is rather to be good soldiers – to live according to the imperatives upon us . . . ⁱⁱ

Allison reminds us of Viktor Frankl's thought: We don't know the ultimate meaning of life. In the absence of that knowledge we have to ask ourselves what *our* meaning is. What is life calling us to? Or, to read through Paul's lens, what is the Holy Spirit leading us to, that is part of a vision we only dimly comprehend? We too are trees; we may see the vision, as Paul describes it, but we also know very little of what is going on.

This incomprehensibility is what makes Denise, heaven's receptionist, so funny and so profound. For those of you, like me, who needed a newspaper article to find out about Denise, she is a character on TikTok "created by [Taryn Delanie Smith](#), the current Miss New York and media personality and a [former receptionist](#) herself. In a white bathrobe standing in for celestial robes, using a pink plastic razor as a headset, she nails the details of office life: the strained politeness on the phone with a difficult client, the sotto voce comments to colleagues, the group coffee order, the faulty printer. Between calls, Denise gossips about Jackie O. bumping

into Marilyn Monroe or complains that Paul Revere writes every email in all caps."ⁱⁱⁱ

Denise deals with ethical issues. In one video, a woman calls to make sure that her granddaughter won't be getting into heaven. Denise checks the file: "She's a mother, she's done a lot of good deeds. Things are looking good for her." When the caller explains that her granddaughter has had a child out of wedlock, Denise says, "So ... I hope you're sitting down. Well, we don't care." She explains the rules: "We appreciate the fact that you [went every Sunday for 20 years](#). ... But you also made ... 48 Starbucks baristas cry and that does ding your credit up here." "Stacy, look at this email I just got from Shakespeare. Look at that. Look at that. I mean, I'm not reading that. It's like eight pages long."

But the one that operates so well on both levels is the one she made for a woman who emailed asking if she could greet her baby Olivia. "I lost her two years ago. But I know she's with my Dad and Grandpa. But I miss her so much." I cannot possibly convey the brilliance and delicacy of this video, but I'm putting the link^{iv} in my footnotes. She turns from her computer and says, "Oh look, a whole gaggle of angels coming in. Who you got there? Ohh, I know who that is. Let me see her. She's beautiful. She's so small. Hi, Olivia. You're so sweet. And one day, a long time from now (down on earth, not a long time here) your mom will come up here to be with you and she'll be so happy to see you. But in the meantime [turning to her keyboard] I actually have a couple of people up here that are excited to meet you . . . I got 'em. Will you take Olivia down to the heavenly meadow? Dad and Grandpa are down there, and they're waiting for her. Okay, thank you, angels. [turns back] Wasn't she precious? Absolutely precious. I swear to my boss --did you get that one? I kill myself . . ."

God is not up in the sky, and heaven does not have a receptionist. But Denise--or Taryn

Smith, who studied religion at St. John's University, models for us how to play delicately with our limitedness *and* our vital part in the redemption God's unfolding, incomprehensible creation. She points out the vast difference between the world as it is and the world as it should be: "Oh, you were one of those big megachurch pastors? With a private jet? Fun, super fun. How did you pay for it? Okay, I think you know what I'm going to say next. Yes, okay, goodbye." She's satirizing our obviously inadequate conventions about the divine, and at the same time embodying perfectly the tenderness and unconditional love that Jesus showed in his limited incarnation. With art--with an amazing comedic talent--and a deep well of compassion, she takes her small place in the divine comedy and encourages us to take our places as well, with as much playfulness, lightness of touch, and tenderness for God's creation. We have tiny, important work to do. We should both lean on the mystery, lean on God's boundlessness and providence, *and* embrace the constraints with which we live, which are after all so delicate and so beautiful. God is for us; anyone against us has no chance at all.

Great Spirit, you have lit upon each of us a flame to serve you in all that we do. Ignite your flame, and help us to burn brightly for you. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

ⁱ *The New Evangelicals Podcast*, episode 142, "Pete Ruins Quantum Physics"

ⁱⁱ <https://www.thecontemplativelife.org/blog/category/Dale+Allison>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/05/15/denise-heavens-receptionist-taryn-delanie-smith-tiktok/>

^{iv} https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=69HcNf8q8qk&ab_channel=TarynDelanieSmith