

“On the Cusp of Understanding”

Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-11

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Church historian—and popular writer, Diana Butler Bass, was on a flight from Washington, D.C., to Los Angeles, and a successful executive was seated next to her. After she told Butler Bass about her work, she asked, *“And what do you do?”*

She replied that she writes about religion and spirituality.

She laughed. *“Religion isn’t a very popular word, is it?”*

Butler Bass agreed.

“I used to be religious,” the executive explained. *“I grew up Catholic, but left the church over the sex-abuse scandal. The church doesn’t make much sense in the world as it is now. But I still believe in God. I’d say I’m a spiritual person.”*

Butler Bass replied, *“Lots of people tell me that they are ‘spiritual but not religious. What do you mean by that?’ Who is God to you?”*

The executive shared how she found God in **nature**, in her **relationships** with family, friends, and neighbors, and in the work she does in the world. She [spoke] of how God was present to her through **doing justice** (serving hungry people at a local shelter), **contemplative worship** (occasional attendance at an evening jazz service at an Episcopal Church), and **offering hospitality** toward those in need (caring for those who were doubting, ill, or grieving among her own friends).

Intelligent and obviously compassionate, she understood her own work as a **vocation** to create a more just and inclusive world. Sensing that Butler Bass would know what she was talking about, she threw in a few theologians and Catholic saints, like Thomas Aquinas and Dorothy Day, to explain her perspectives on spirituality and social justice.

Butler Bass asked, *“Why don’t you join the church with the jazz service?”* “I’ve thought about that,” the executive confessed. She also shared that she sometimes

felt guilty about **not** attending church anymore. *“But ‘joining’ an organization strikes me as a strange way to relate to God. And the institutional church is so broken, so hypocritical. It has wounded so many people. I just can’t do that again with any honesty.”*

The executive paused, seeming to wonder if she could continue. *“But these other things—the Spirit all around, caring and praying for people, working for a better world—they **ground** me.”*¹

I want you to think about this word *grounded*. It’s an important theological concept.

You see, in 1916, a young German military Chaplain named Paul Tillich was stationed on the front lines of World War I. The war undid all Tillich’s youthful confidence in the world and in faith. He wrote to a friend, saying that he spent more time digging graves than sharing the sacraments. *“I have constantly the most immediate and very strong feeling that I am no longer alive,”* he confessed. *“I am experiencing the actual death of this our time.”*

Tillich experienced *the end of the old world*, the same “death” Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Elie Wiesel would write of during the next war; he felt *that a certain God had died on the battlefields of Europe ... One could no longer easily preach about the benevolence of God or issue promises of peace from the heights of the mountaintop.*

After the war, Tillich made it his work to find dependable *theological ground*. Eventually he proclaimed that God is the *“Ground of all Being,”* the *“centered presence of the divine”*; the *“whole world”* is God’s *“periphery.”*

Human life may be finite, destined for dirt and death; but the **ground** and all that came from it and was connected to it, claimed Tillich, was drenched with the divine, the source of infinite holiness.

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *“Ground: Finding God in the World, A Spiritual Revolution,”* Harper Collins, NY, NY, 2015, pp. 16, 16

Tillich did *not* mean that God was literally soil—he stressed that God is not an object—but God, *the numinous presence at the center of all things is what grounds us!*²

I share these stories with you—the story of the executive on the airplane and about the theologian, Paul Tillich—because they get at the question, *Where is God?*

It’s a question that humans of every generation and time have asked themselves—even the first followers of Jesus on the day of Pentecost.

You see, when Peter quotes the prophet Joel at the end of this reading from Acts, he paints a picture of Pentecost as a salvation story. Salvation here is more than a vague promise of eternal life. Salvation turns us *toward each other, toward real life and real lives*. The miracle of Pentecost reveals a diverse community—women and men from the first community of Christians along with immigrants living in Jerusalem who had come “from every nation under heaven”—listening to each other, understanding each other, reaching for each other as the Holy Spirit gives them ability.

It’s a miracle of *community* that is possible for us all—because, as Brian Doyle writes, “*love is why we are here.*”³

In other words, in an age of profound, perplexing, and even frightening change (not unlike our own) the early followers of Jesus rediscovered *from the deepest human wisdom* (what they called *the Spirit*) that we are *grounded*—God is truly *with us—here and now*.

But, you know, even those who heard the disciples preaching in their own mother tongue still had to ask: “*What does this mean?*”

“*Upon the verge of comprehension*” seems to me a good description of where we stand at Pentecost. *Who can claim to be wholly fluent in this season’s mysteries and impossibilities, to comprehend fully its appearances and disappearances?*

² Ibid., pp, 17, 18

³ Brian Doyle, “*Leap*”

Think about it: comprehending “*God’s deeds of power*”—the freeing of Jesus from death, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit—requires *more* than finding the equivalent expression in our own language. Comprehension does not arrive, once and for all, once we have looked up all the words.

We glimpse the meaning of Easter *intermittently* in the life we share with others. Those who heard the disciples preach on Pentecost comprehended the message *in their own language*. But that was only the beginning. It was in the life they lived *together* that their answers to “*What does this mean?*” began to take shape. And it was the life they lived *together* that inspired others to try to answer that question as well.

You know, every Pentecost, people from many nations fill the Pantheon in Rome. They celebrate the mass together—some understanding the liturgy word for word, some understanding only the gestures and forms, and some encountering a Christian celebration for the first time.

At the end of the service, Roman firefighters on top of the Pantheon’s dome pour *red rose petals* through the oculus, the large opening in the center of the dome which allows light to move through the building as the earth turns. The oculus has never been covered. It has stood open like the threshold between heaven and earth no matter which gods were being worshiped beneath it. Looking up through it at the unadorned sky, those gathered might be standing in any moment in time, next to all who ever stood beneath it and lifted their faces.

In the Pantheon on Pentecost Sunday, some will hear the gospel proclaimed in their own language; some will hear it in a language they do not understand. But when the rose petals begin to fall, they all will be made one for a moment like the *Parthians, Judeans, Romans, Arabs, and others* who heard the gospel in their own tongues. They may not know each other’s languages, but when the rain of rose petals begins, they will have their faces turned in the same direction.⁴

Friends, like the early followers of Jesus, we, too, are living in a time of *sacred cosmopolitanism*. A time in which many have an awareness of the connections we share with God and others *here on earth*.

⁴ Stephanie Paulsell, “*On the Verge of Comprehension*,” *The Christian Century*, May 16, 2016

In the past, this understanding has embodied humankind's greatest aspirations, and it has guided artists, prophets, gurus, mystics, and saints through the ages.

But what was once only the vision of a few has now become a *theological revolution of many*. It is an understanding and experience of God that goes over boundaries: the boundary that once divided Creator from creation, the boundary that divided nature from the human community, the boundaries that divided human communities, and finally the boundary that divided God from humankind.

Today, *instead of living inside tight religious boxes, many people are experiencing a borderless kind of spiritual awareness that has enabled them to find God in the world of nature and in the geography of human life*. (This is both the *challenge* and *opportunity* for spiritually aware churches in the 21st century).

In other words, the recognition of *sacred cosmopolitanism* is that we are [all] citizens with God and one another in a *holy cosmos* together.

And so, as that first Pentecost congregation asked, "*What does this mean?*" they kept trying to find out—in breaking bread together and praying for each other, in studying together and enjoying each other's company, in the sharing of their possessions and caring for those in need out of that abundance.

On the *verge* of comprehension, we are called *not* to perfect understanding, but to the imperfect life of community. On the *threshold* of what we understand and what we do not, there is room for our comprehension to be shaped by *solidarity*, room for us to keep our faces *turned toward love*.