

Turning from scripture to Spirit

A sermon on Revelation 1:9–19
for the Sunday before Pentecost

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I had just finished my second year of college: our papers were submitted and our exams completed. In honour of this occasion my roommates and I thought it would be good to let loose a little, so three of us headed downtown, ready for some mischief. Now we were renting a house in the small Mennonite community of

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Steinbach, Manitoba, so that limited our options. We hit the 7-11 for some Slurpees. We pulled a stuffed racoon across the street with a string when cars drove by. You know, wild and crazy college stuff.

The night wore on, and we found ourselves wandering around aimlessly. Then we heard some shouting, and we went to investigate. A man and woman were outside on a driveway, having an altercation. We were quite close to them, though hidden from view. Eventually their fight ended, and the

man got into his car to drive away. We ducked behind a bush in the neighbors’ yard, but as the man backed out of the driveway, the car paused for a moment and its headlights lit up our bush, clearly revealing the three of us cowering behind it.

The man shut off the car engine and opened the driver’s door with a yell. We took off at a run, and he gave chase. As we headed down an alley, we instinctively split up. I found myself running alone—or rather, running with an angry man in hot pursuit. I am at best a sprinter, not a distance runner, and I knew I could not keep up my pace. How big was he? How old was he? I had no clear idea, no notion of who was behind me or what his intentions were, but I had to decide what to do.

As it happened, I stopped, folding my hands behind my back as I turned to face my pursuer.

Having ears to hear and eyes to see

For congregations that follow the rhythms of the church year, there comes a point when the readings and celebrations begin to catch up with life. We are approaching that time. We have observed the feast of the ascension, marking Jesus' departure from the world. And next Sunday we celebrate Pentecost, the day on which the Holy Spirit descended and the church was formed and began her mission in earnest. The weeks and months of the church year that follow form what is called ordinary time. This period of the church calendar takes up half the year and ends with Advent, when we start over. For most of us this time of year is for taking a break, going on vacation, lying low.

Theologically, however, Pentecost forms the launching pad for the life of the church. Ordinary time should be that time in which the church continues to write and enact the story of God's work on earth. Let's take a moment to reflect on the transition we are about to enter into. Here we look to see if our tradition will gain traction, or even to see the move from scripture to Spirit.

For all of my adult life I have held a high view of scripture. I held a high view of scripture even when I was confronted with my inadequate view of the Bible as a moral rule book. I continued to

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hold a high view of scripture even when I needed to face the war and bloodshed of the Old Testament or the seemingly multiple theologies contained within it that were difficult if not impossible to reconcile at points. While I saw others around me lower their view of the Bible or even doubt its ongoing value, I continued to find it ever deepening in texture and meaning.

I continue to hold a high view of scripture, but that view has changed fundamentally over time. This change crystallized in the words of Jesus found in John's Gospel. Jesus said to a crowd, "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39–40; NRSV). Just before this Jesus tells the crowd about God, saying that they "have never heard his voice or seen his form."

Scripture continued to play a high role in my life precisely because it demanded that I lower my view of it and even put it down so that I could listen and look for the presence of God in the world and within my own spirit. One of the dominant threads throughout the Bible and particularly in the Gospels is the notion of having ears to hear and eyes to see. I am coming to believe that one of the most important roles that scripture and our Christian tradition can play is linked to their ability at crucial moments to *point away from themselves* so that we see and hear the movements of God's Spirit.

Turning toward the voice

In Luke's Gospel (7:18–23) we read about John the Baptist's disciples, who approach Jesus to find out if he is the Messiah who is to come. How does Jesus respond? He answers them with instructions to "go and tell John what you have seen and heard." What is going on here? What is happening at this basic level of human experience? What is it about hearing and seeing that is at once so obvious and yet so elusive, at least in the Gospels? It seems that these are senses needing to be reborn, or even to come into existence for the first time. Are we born blind and deaf? Do we become blind and deaf?

This question may seem like a minor point of interpretation, but in our reading from the book of Revelation (1:9–19), note that twice it says that John *turned*.

I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, "Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea." Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a

flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades. Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this."

The Jewish concept of repentance, shaped by the Old Testament, is linked closely to the simple Hebrew word for "turn." Repentance is simply turning toward God. In this text John reports that he was "in the spirit on the Lord's day," when he heard a voice *behind him* telling him to write in a book what he sees. The Lord's day probably refers to the weekly routine of worship, but

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we are not told just what John was doing. Perhaps he was reading scripture, or maybe he was praying or singing. In any case, the voice came from *behind him*. It did not come from whatever his attention had been directed toward.

The voice presents John with a choice. He can continue with his religious practice, his scripture reading or praying or singing. Such practices are commended to us in scripture and testified to throughout Christian traditions, and they have their place. But if practices such as scripture reading do not remain in their appropriate role, then even if we do not consciously turn away from God, we might find that God has moved, that God is now behind us.

John must decide whether he will listen to the voice coming from behind him or remain focused on his religious practice. The narrative continues: "I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me," and then, just in case we missed his use of the word *turn*, he says: "*on turning* I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man." John turned from his spiritual practice, perhaps one that was set and

planned like our Sunday morning worship, and he looked and saw Jesus, the Son of Man, moving in the midst of the churches. John turned *from* the practice of the church to see Jesus at work *among* the churches.

We should also notice John's response on seeing the Son of Man: "When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead." This prostration is a common response to visions of God. Think of Isaiah or Daniel, among others. Maybe the shock is in encountering something so *otherworldly*, but I suspect it is rather the result of hearing and seeing the world so clearly, of hearing and seeing God clearly *in the world*. We shut down in the face of this clarity; it is too much.

We are leaving the established seasons of the church year. We are leaving predictability, orientation, and comfort, and are now opening ourselves to hear and see from places behind, above, beside, and below our traditions and outside of scripture.

We feel unable to take in and account for what is happening, and the images seem foreign and bizarre. But perhaps they are actually clarifications and intensifications of reality. Perhaps these visions are like early works of Picasso that attempted to account for multiple perspectives on a single canvas, creating at once a sense of chaos but also an intensification and deepening of engagement.

Leaving predictability

This is what I want us to reflect on as we approach Pentecost and prepare to proclaim that the Spirit of God has been poured out on all flesh. We are leaving the set and established seasons of the church year. We are leaving a sense of predictability, orientation, and comfort, and are now opening ourselves to hear and see from places behind, above, beside, and below our traditions and outside of scripture.

When I think back on that night during my college years living in Steinbach, I wonder why I made the decision to turn around when I was being pursued. Two things come to mind. First and foremost, the decision was in many ways forced on me. I simply *could not* continue as I was going. The choice became a question of *how* I would turn.

This experience came at a time when I had been thinking and reflecting a great deal about Mennonite nonviolence. If I had not wrestled with that tradition, I doubt that I would have responded

as I did. When I stopped to turn around, I deliberately folded my hands behind my back, so that I could face what was coming in a receptive, nonthreatening way.

And what did I turn to see? I saw a man who was angry, exhausted, and in pain. In colourful language he asked me what I thought I was doing. I can't remember much of what we said, but we ended up talking and not fighting.

What would have happened if my primary formation had been in running? I would have exhausted that resource and escaped—

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and missed seeing this man. What if my primary formation had been in some form of combat or self-defence? I would have turned to face an enemy and a target. But instead I found myself turning in a posture of strength in peace, and I believe this turning gave me the ability to see and be seen in a certain way.

It would be irresponsible to suggest that adopting such a posture will always preserve us from conflict or harm. Nor do I want to suggest that we passively open ourselves to potential violence. The question is whether

our religious resources insulate us from the world or empower us to face it faithfully. To what extent are our steps turned in keeping with the life of Jesus to face the powers of this world?

I also know that my tendency continues to be to use most of my resources to avoid turning and seeing and hearing the voice that is coming from behind me. This voice comes as a threat because it takes away our control over our traditions and patterns and securities. Whether in our relationships, in our churches, or in our workplaces, when we hear that voice behind us we employ every resource against turning. We get defensive, we attack, we retreat, we entrench, we quickly submit, we rationalize, we justify, we distract, we ignore. But what if we simply learned to listen and then turn to look into the face of the one who is speaking? I am not claiming that every such presence or voice is that of God, but I am not sure we will hear God if we don't stop and turn and look and listen.

The traditions and practices of the church and family and scripture itself are only as faithful as we allow them to be to help

us see and hear the work of the Spirit in the world. The Spirit calls us to the ongoing practice of turning, not necessarily because we have deliberately turned from God but because the Spirit of God moves. It is the voice of Jesus coming up to Mary as she continues to face the empty tomb in grief. It is the voice of the messenger telling the people not to look at the sky after Jesus ascended. The disciples did not actively turn away from God; God continued to move.

The turning that happened in my own story came when I was no longer able to avoid seeing. Scripture and tradition contributed to my turning in a certain way, but only after I had literally exhausted my other forces and resources. And mine is not the only story in which people come to the end of their resources and abilities before they begin to see. Jesus blesses the sight of those who are in poverty, because they have no resources to escape reality. They see all too clearly the realities of our world.

So the call for the church, especially amid the affluence of the West, is the call of John in the book of Revelation. He was in the

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spirit on the Lord's day, valuing the depth of what his tradition offered. Perhaps he was reading scripture. Perhaps he was in prayer. Perhaps he was in mid-song when he heard a voice behind him.

We are approaching Pentecost, when we celebrate the only resource given to the church, the Spirit of God. Let's mark Pentecost as a time of transition. Let's allow the church's so-called ordinary time to be a time of listening. Let's allow it to be a time to

experiment with acts of turning to face the voices that come from behind us.

I cannot tell you what you will hear or what you will see. I cannot tell you the outcome of your encounter. I can only point to our tradition and our testimonies both in the Bible and in the church. I can only point to them as they point away from themselves toward God, the one who moves and speaks beside, below, and behind, through the power of the Spirit who moves among us in the world.

About the author

David Driedger is an associate minister at First Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba. David lives with his wife and son in Winnipeg's dynamic Spence neighbourhood, in which he tries to reside at the corner of rigorous thought and social concern (though more often than not, he wanders down the back alley of confusion). David is also a blog junkie who contributes regularly to *Canadian Mennonite's* blog (<http://www.canadianmennonite.org/blogs>) as well as his own personal sites (<http://thelangsides.com> and <http://thedescribe.com>).