

“Welcome in the Midst of Chaos”

Romans 8:14-17; Acts 2:1-21 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – June 5, 2022
Pentecost Sunday!

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that the fire of your Spirit might burn brightly in our hearts and bring light to your world. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Have you read this book? Maybe when you were young? It begins in an orphanage/boarding school, like so many British children's books. A young child, maybe 10 or so, has been going to this school for a few years now, despite not being fully orphaned yet. The grief from losing her mother at a very young age is present but vague. Her father works abroad somewhere doing something equally vague, but occasionally comes home on holidays and takes her away on lovely trips to the seaside.

But then her father also meets a tragic end, and she is doomed to live in the orphanage end of the school forever, never going on holiday again. The head mistress is, of course, sour and awful and slightly sadistic. Everyone dresses in drab blacks and browns and greys. The children are made to scrub things that aren't even dirty, just to build character. Except none of them are actually allowed to be characters; rather everything about the school is designed to sap out any hint of individuality. The spark of wildness that the child used to feel was her last connection

to her mother has started to dim in the atmosphere of repression and fear that dominates the orphanage.

But then one day, she is summoned to the head mistress' office, terrified because she doesn't know why. And the head mistress informs her, in haughty, dubious tones, that apparently there is a long-lost cousin of her mother's who is coming to fetch her; she is being adopted. This cousin is clearly not someone of whom the head mistress approves, and when she arrives, the girl can see why. She has wild, red hair that probably wouldn't stay under control, if she had bothered to try to control it. She's wearing colors, lots of them, and though colors aren't something the girl has a lot of experience with, she's pretty sure they don't all quite go together. Despite her peculiar appearance, this cousin is looking around the school as if she doesn't approve of it!

She whisks the girl away, in a car that requires some cajoling to get moving, talking the whole time about, well, everything, so fast that the girl has trouble keeping up. It seems the family has five other children, and possibly a lot of animals, except some of those names might have been neighbors or other relatives. But they definitely have room for her, because they couldn't stand the thought of her having to stay in that bleak prison any longer; why her father enrolled her there in the first place – though we shouldn't speak ill of the dead, but what was he thinking?

And then they arrive at the house, and it's glorious! There are children, and animals, and vines growing up the house, and trees that people are clearly allowed to

climb, because she just managed to spy things up in the branches before going inside. And it's clear that people don't spend too much time scrubbing here, though probably just enough most days, but the clutter is a little overwhelming. So many colors! And smells! And noises – is that a parrot? What was the name of the boy loudly practicing his Portuguese lesson? But finally, she's shown to her room – with apologies that it's so small, except that it's way bigger than the space she had in a giant room with 40 girls at school – and finally, she can take a breath and try to take in the fact that this is now home. She's home. And it's wild and chaotic and overwhelming, but in a good way, and she gets to stay.

All of this happens in the very first chapter of the book, of course, and what comes next varies from novel to novel, but the important thing is that we know that this girl and her new cousin siblings and probably some of the animals are going to Have Adventures. Every once in a while, she will remember what life was like at the orphanage and shudder. And maybe someday, she will have the opportunity to rescue someone else from a similar drudgery and bring them into the wild, colorful life she's now been given.

I read a lot of books about orphans undergoing life changing experiences when I was growing up, but I didn't realize till now that these are Holy Spirit stories. This is the story that came into my head when I read our scriptures for today. The story of Pentecost is so chaotic: all those languages, and yes, people understood, but also it must have been really loud and a little confusing. And the tongues of fire – they must

have looked beautiful, but also, that seems a little dangerous, right? To imagine that scene of chaos as a moment of welcome, of invitation into a whole new life, which is, in fact, what it was. It seems so improbable. But then to read Paul's words in Romans: not "a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear," but "a spirit of adoption." And if we didn't grow up in an orphanage, treated like slaves and ruled by fear, maybe we don't truly comprehend the enormity of the phrase "spirit of adoption." But maybe stories can help us understand.

The truth is that far too many people have the impression that God is more like a cruel head mistress – always maybe just around the corner about to catch you doing something unacceptable and punish you soundly – when in reality, the Holy Spirit is like a wild- and red-haired mama cousin who's breezing in to liberate us from bondage. The Church we're being adopted into – over and over, because we keep getting pulled back to the orphanage for one stupid reason or another – this Church is chaotic and wild, but in a good way. It's full of surprises, and nooks and crannies to be explored, and situations where we get to leverage our resources creatively in order to help a neighbor in need.

Just like in this imagined novel, the scene of liberation happens right at the beginning of the Book of Acts, and then the Adventures Begin. And that is where we find ourselves today. A little overwhelmed at the chaos of the world the Spirit is calling us to live fully within, but welcomed, so, so welcomed. This is your home now, the Spirit is telling us. You belong here. There are things for you to do here,

circumstances that need your attention, people who need the gifts you have to offer, a family who will love you and accept you and encourage you to be just exactly who you are, no matter how unusual. There are Adventures ahead, wrongs to be righted, evil to be vanquished, other beloved children to be liberated. There is laughter to be laughed; there are tears to be cried, dances to be danced, meals to be shared, fires to be stoked. And it's loud and quiet and colorful and sweet, and it's home. The Spirit has adopted us.

I don't know that Paul had any inkling of British children's literature when he was writing to the Christians in Rome. But he didn't have to, because the Spirit took care of carrying the message forward into time. Did the disciples, overcome by the wind and the flames, have any idea what was happening, or were they just going along with what the Spirit was doing and hoping to figure it out later? The chaos is part of the beauty. It's not incidental; rather it's integral to the way God works. Never just one narrative, never just one language, never just one way of being in the world, but a beautiful diversity of experiences and cultures and revelations. A shared liberation that unites us across all the barriers that kept us imprisoned separately. The Spirit has adopted us. Let the Adventures begin! Hallelujah and Amen!