

**Hollins University
Alumnae Reunion 2009
Sunday, May 31, 2009**

**Worship Service
“The Surprise of Your Life”
By the Rev. Dr. Jan Fuller '78**

Today is Pentecost in the Christian calendar. It is the pinnacle culmination of Easter, a time Augustine asserts that there is to be no kneeling, no fasting, and Alleluias everywhere as hopeful signs of a time of perpetual praise.

This is the birthday of the church, the flawed arrangement by which God in Jesus Christ chose to share his love and message. This is the time in which Christians get to, and ought to, live out the message of freedom and grace because it is closer than at any other time.

Of course, Pentecost is also a Jewish festival, the spring harvest, the celebration of the Holy One giving the law to Moses on Sinai. It is a Jewish feast of God's order, trustworthiness, creativity and plan for this world.

Desiderius Erasmus, a Dutch scholar on the cusp between the medieval and renaissance worlds, who was said to have laid the egg that hatched the reformation, is given credit for a classic story of Jesus as he returned to heaven after his time on earth. The angels gathered around him to learn what all happened during his days on earth. Jesus told them of the miracles, his teachings, his death on the cross, and his resurrection. When he finished his story, Michael, the Archangel, asked Jesus, "Lord, you have given your life for the salvation of the world. Now that you have ascended into heaven, how will your work be continued on earth? What happens now?" Jesus answered, "I have left behind eleven faithful disciples and a handful of men and women who have faithfully followed me. I have entrusted everything to them and have given them My Spirit to strengthen their hearts and their hands." The angel asked Him, "But Lord, they are mere mortals, imperfect in every way. What if they are not up to the task Lord, if they fail, what then? What is your other plan?" And Christ looked back at the earth and said, "They must not fail, for I have no other plan." What an awkward moment in heaven.

Imagine their surprise when those same imperfect human followers when they found out they were taking over for the beloved One on earth, when they begin to speak languages they did not know. They were in the upper room, waiting, praying, singing their prayers like good Jews, like the steady murmur of water over rocks, rising and falling. Maybe they were chanting scriptures, psalms, calling out for God to deliver and guide. Perhaps this is what we want too when we pray.

The prophet Ezekiel stands over a valley of dry bones, in the midst of the captivity of Babylon, and the desolation of his people and land, after the great carnage of war and suffering. Then the Lord, who looks on with Ezekiel, calls out to the four winds: “breathe upon these slain that they may live. I am going to open your graves and put my spirit within you so that you will live.” It must have seemed impossible, incomprehensible news.

My friends, welcome to a Creation, Resurrection and Pentecost world, in which God creates and allows the predictable and also where the impossible is possible, flawed disciples lead the way, the dead are raised, bones to sinews to life, the incomprehensible blossoms before our eyes, and the best surprises may be yet to come.

Think of it this way. When you left Hollins the first time, you had a plan, a direction, or even a clear indirection. You stepped out to make it happen. And here you are in a very different place, but completely at home in the world you have created. It’s all been a surprise, even the surprises themselves. And who could have known, when you returned to campus filled with such trepidation, that you would find that you actually LIKE people in your class you didn’t remember? Or that you would have so much in common with them. Who could have guessed that you would be in this profession, instead of the one you set out for when you left Hollins to set out for your career plans. The creativity and resilience of your classmates is a wonderful surprise. The silent suffering some of you have endured since last we saw you was not the plan. The grace you exhibit may take our breath away. And there are those whom we hoped we would see, but find them gone on before us in death. While these surprises have rarely--this weekend anyway--left any of us speechless (from the sound of things), they should come as no great surprise in a Pentecost world.

I don't know about you, but I am deeply ambivalent about surprises. I like them when they are ones I like. I don't like nasty surprises, or things that shake up my ordered world too much. What about you? If only we had control over the surprises...then they wouldn't be much surprise.

Are you, yourself, surprised at what you have made of the hodge podge of gifts and abilities, with the random set of circumstances that became your life? Think about your classmates and friends. Who got divorced or married? Who had kids or not? Who stayed home? Who got elected? Who rode horses? Who wrote books? Who disappeared never to be heard from again? Could you have predicted any of it?

Don't forget, for all the regulations of God's world, we worship a Pentecost God, who blows up a wind when all seems lost and turns us all inside out and upside down. The Holy One we turn to in joy and anguish raises the dead and enlivens bones dried up from too much life and too much death. The tender spirit we adore gives power to women and men, slaves and free, old and young to prophesy, proclaim, portend their visions and dreams. The problem with God is that she will deeply, completely, and eternally confound us. God will not fit into our pockets, nor conform to our small agendas. And God will not rest until we have seen beyond the narrow confines of our own ability to love, or adapt. God will prod and push us until we are out of our comfort zones and into the scary trust of life. She will surprise us until we can see that we can trust only in the strength and surprise of the Holy Spirit of life.

Our own Hollins alumna Annie Dillard said it perfectly in a little essay *Holy the Firm*, in which she asks God and the universe the questions of suffering. In the midst of her anguish that a small girl she knew was burned over her whole face and body, she attended a small church on an island. There she realized the danger of calling upon the all powerful. Calling upon God is like mixing chemicals – you don't know what kind of explosions you might get if God really arrived. Ushers ought to pass out crash helmets, life preservers and signal flares; “they should lash us to our pews.” We act and speak politely with God, like we have forgotten the danger of dealing with the untamed and wild heart of heaven. “If God were to blast such a service to bits” we “would be genuinely shocked.” Her point is: how can we call upon God, the Holy One of the

universe, the creator, redeemer, and sustainer of all life, and think that all will be as we expect, calm, predictable, normal. The One we court with eloquence and flattering speeches is a wildfire we are crazy to think we can contain. “For the sleeping god may awake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.” “This,” knowledge of God’s wildness, she says, “is the beginning of wisdom.” (Harper Colophon, 1977).

Here is the bad news, my friends: If God’s power is on the loose in our world then anything could happen. Our world could be turned around, our hearts renewed, churches schools and congregations born and reborn. We might learn new languages, in order to speak and hear our neighbors into freedom. We may receive the holy spirit in a wild wind or blasting thunder, like angry prophets calling for justice or tender shepherds leading frightened sheep toward home. If God’s spirit is around, then we cannot imagine what is about to happen, what meaning we may find in suffering, what love we may discover in service of the poor and homeless, what gifts come from our own perceived emptiness. Ezekiel knows this unpredictable God. The gifted and foolish apostles know the One who snuck through the locked door in a rush of a mighty wind. Could anyone have seen it coming? Probably not.

There is that baleful moment in one of my favorite movies *Out of Africa*, when there are is too much rain to grow coffee, and finally the roasting house burns to the ground, and the old muslim caretaker says “God plays with us.”

Of course, we also know God to be the one who keeps us safe, the one helps us in trouble, leads us home beside still waters, gives us the law and orders the planets in their courses God keeps us from evil and from falling. Indeed. This too. The Pentecost God of glory shades and shines upon us, thunders on, flashing forth flames of beauty, his voice shaking the foundations of the earth. This is our God: trouble maker, upsetter of apple carts, the wild card in the deck we try to keep so orderly.

Pentecost is the day to celebrate and know and stand in awe that the spirit of God is loosed among us. Anything could happen: creation or recreation. We could become the people we have always hoped to be. A small sprout of hope could grow in the deep well of loss and

despair. The lost can be found. The powers and principalities can be overturned. The valleys shall be raised up and the high places be made low. The innocent teach the splendid and the full go away wanting. At least for today, we could live like anything CAN happen.

The invitation is to open our hearts again and anew to the one who can trouble us into peace, who can live even in death, who will save us when we lose ourselves and always make us new.

Sometimes life leads along the path of ease and comfort, and sometimes through the shadow of death. All the way we go with God, always holy, always the most stable of love, and always full of surprises. In the economy of this unruly and trustworthy God, anything is possible, and nothing will be wasted. The only thing to say in the face of any rude Godly awakening or any tender and orderly care is the refrain of the psalmists: Glory! Alleluia! Thanks!

May it be so for us.