

Fire From Heaven

Pentecost Sunday

Scripture: Joel 2:28-32; Acts 19:1-7

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Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

It was as the past century was about to dawn that there was a significant event in Chicago, just down the lake. On the shores of Lake Michigan, there was created the Columbian Exposition. I was not aware of the tremendous dimension of that event, the Chicago World's Fair, but on the shores of Lake Michigan in 1893 there was created what they called The White City. The great architects of the country vied for the right to design that city. This exposition covered some 644 acres and, as one came from the lake or along Lakeshore in Chicago, one was met by this gleaming, white city: resplendent buildings, a reflecting pool, the triumphal arch - all made sort of like out of material similar to plaster of Paris or *papier-maché*. There were steel ribbings for the shape, but it was not a lasting kind of creation. It was the sort of thing you do for a fair and exposition, a temporary display. But it was magnificent, it had the grandeur that was Greece and the glory that was Rome, and it was the celebration of the coming to this continent of Christopher Columbus. The Columbian Exposition was full of all of the daring and the boldness and the greatness and self-assurance of the American spirit at the end of a century looking forward to the 20th century which would be the American century in which the American spirit would dominate the world, obviously, in the providence of God. There was, to look at it in retrospect, a great deal of hubris, a great deal of human pride, but there was a great vision.

The *Cosmopolitan* magazine of March 1893 had on the cover a bundle of sticks, called a *fades*, a Roman symbol for authority that the magistrates had paraded before them, a bundle of sticks bound with a cord and an axe, and on each one of the sticks was written the name of a denomination, obviously all being bound into one, and there was a ribbon that tied the bundle which said, "The fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man," and there was an American eagle with his sharp eye guarding it all, which had in its beak a twisted ribbon on which was written, "Intolerance." The centerpiece of the Columbian Exposition was the first World Parliament of Religions, and the planners brought to Chicago religious leaders from all around the globe. There were Hindus and Shinto priests and Catholic priests and Baptist preachers and Buddhist monks - you name it. The ten great religious traditions of the world were represented in this first ever

Parliament of Religions which was dedicated not to the snuffing out of the respective religious, but rather, a banding together of all the religions against all irreligious. I don't have time to read to you some of the statements of the opening of that exposition, and particularly its centerpiece, the Parliament of Religions, but there are statements that are filled with idealism, filled with hope, filled with a vibrant spirit that humankind was on the very threshold of realizing the kingdom of God. That was at the beginning of the 20th century.

The exposition closed in October. There was an economic downturn, and the condition of those who had served as waiters and cleaners and all kinds of personnel in this great exposition all summer found themselves without work. Many of them became homeless and found in this temporary exposition, now abandoned, a place to find shelter. This spectacular White City in January of 1894, because of those who were finding shelter there and making a fire to keep themselves warm, a fire which got out of control, the whole White City on one night was reduced to dust and ashes. It may have been an omen of what was to come, for all of the hopes and all of the dreams that were gathered together in that exposition and that Parliament of Religions, in a great closing ceremony at which was sung "America" and "The Hallelujah Chorus" by a 500-voice choir, the fusing together of the heavenly city and the earthly city - all of those hopes and all of those dreams which envisioned a future unlimited, were shortly brought to grief as the world entered into the first great World War and then the second great World War, and then the Holocaust and the horror in our own memory of that awful event. Those wonderful dreams of humanity, of oneness, of unity which, of course, were all under the auspices of the American spirit and a kind of benevolent, liberal, white Protestantism, nevertheless came to grief. The journal to which I still subscribe, *The Christian Century*, was named at this particular period *The Christian Century* because the 20th century was to be the Christian century, and then it all came to grief.

There was a group of theologians in the 60's who became known as the "Death of God theologians," and Professor Harvey Cox from Harvard, who was here recently with us, wrote a book at that time which became a bestseller, *The Secular City*, asking how one finds God in a culture totally secular, a culture in which the leading scholarly opinion is that God is dead. From that exuberant hope and idealism at the end of the century before to the middle of this past century, the despair.

Harvey Cox, who wrote *The Secular City*, has a more recent book just a couple of years out which he has entitled *Fire From Heaven*, which documents the great White City and the hopes of the Parliament of Religion, and he says at the same time there was in Los Angeles among the poor in a totally down-and-out district, in an abandoned warehouse, an outbreak of spiritual enthusiasm and power. 1906, among uneducated, many illiterate poor folk under the leadership of a black pastor, a movement that has become known as the Pentecostal movement, the stark contrast between the White City and the Parliament of Religions, the

aspirations for a unity and oneness for all humankind, sort of under an American, Protestant, Christian banner brought to dust and ashes, and in a few decades coming to expression in the death of God, and this little movement no one noticed from people about whom no one ever heard, called the Pentecostal movement, which is alive and well today at the end of the 20th century and moving into our own present 21st century. Harvey Cox acknowledges that he took the analysis of the death of God theologians too seriously and that, while the hopes of those great leaders at the end of the 19th century have come to nothing, God was doing a work among an obscure people, beginning a movement that encircles the globe today. So, instead of the Secular City of the 60's, Harvey Cox's latest book is entitled *Fire From Heaven* because, finally, the present and the future are not left to human ingenuity and human planning, but rather, we wait upon the Spirit of God.

It is a fascinating historical retrospective and I would say only this - that it is very easy 100 years later to mock the planners of the World Parliament of Religions and the hopes and the dreams of the White City. It is easy enough at this point to recognize human pride, human naiveté. It is easy enough to put them down for what was, nonetheless, a magnificent dream.

It was naive in that, in its speaking of Pentecost, the arrival again of Pentecost, this language in which they spoke, they were really seeing a blossoming of liberal Christianity, and they were naive to think that somehow or other we humankind can plan and shape and determine the landscape of the future. But, let's give them credit - it was a magnificent dream, and what the horrors through which we have passed in the 20th century have taught us is perhaps a touch of humility and then the recognition of a diversity which is not to be put into a blender and homogenized into some kind of bland human formula, but a diversity that is representative of the depth of the human spirit, that is, representative of the diversity of the human creature that is a reflection we would say today of the intention of the Creator. Oh, we can put down those dreamers of yesteryear, but they had a great dream, and what we have had to go through, the horror of war, of Holocaust, and the globalization of our human experience is the recognition of a grand menagerie of human creatures, of a grand rainbow of human personality and human beings.

We have come, I think, today to celebrate and to rejoice in the diversity which is not an obstacle to be overcome, but a creative wonder in which to rejoice. As we recognize that diversity, we just may be in a better position to begin to realize the hopes and the dream, acknowledging all of its naiveté and all of its human pride. Nonetheless, the dream of a world that is one and a humanity that is living in peace, giving to each one dignity and acknowledging that God, that deep Mystery Who is the ground of our being and the Source of our life, that God Who is beyond each of our traditions but present in each through God's breathing, God's Spirit, we just may be on the threshold of a new, wonderful age for humankind who have come to give up their dreams of dominance and their fear of the other,

ready to join hands with all of those who are other, whether through race, religion, ethnicity, education, economic status, sexual orientation, whatever it may be - to look at the other and not be afraid, but to embrace in an unconditional love that recognizes in each one the image of the God Who is beyond us, but on Pentecost came to dwell within us, and finally, to make us one.

As you go through the narthex, pick up a little ribbon and wear it as a sign of your solidarity with all who are other, with whom we are one through the Spirit of God.

References:

Harvey Cox. *Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the 21st Century*. Da Capo Press, 2001.