

Sermon by Pastor Kathleen O. Reed for the Memorial Service of Helen Kukuk,
University Lutheran Church on the Vigil of Pentecost, May 14, 2016

Why here?

Why now?

Why red?

Here: because this was Helen's favorite living room.

Now: Because what could be more in keeping with Helen's style
than to gather right before the curtain goes up
on one of the Church's best dramas—Pentecost.

Red: Because Helen looked really good in red.

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Here.

Helen had an assortment of living quarters and addresses
over the course of her life,
but her favorite zip-code was 02138
and UniLu was her family home.
Here in this living room
Helen made friends, brought friends, and entertained
with her very best friend in her world, the God whose Spirit
shaped her spunk, revived her when she felt down,
and gave her the love that she was so ready to share with others.
And where else would we have found a living room spacious enough
adjacent to a dining area wide enough
to accommodate everybody giving thanks for Helen's life today.

About this dining area: it has a special feature.

Most of Helen's other dining areas were small
and mandated that she hold several intimate gatherings
over the course of the year.
She invited her pastors twice a year.
One annual lunch for a one-to-one to which she brought a list
of specific interests and concerns for her pastor to respond to.

And one annual dinner to which the pastor's "plus one,"
and 2 or 3
were invited for a purely social evening
—Ken was a beloved regular.

In contrast to Helen's condo dining table,
the UniLu table expands and extends beyond the walls
beyond this zipcode, beyond all times and all zipcodes.

Here,
Helen still chimes in
with Mary Magdalene and Peter—here, and all the witnesses of the resurrection,
here—with earth and sea and all their creatures,
and with angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim,
here—as we praise God's name and join the unending hymn
that begins, Holy, Holy, Holy!

For today's dinner party, for our communion
with God and with Helen at this dining table,
Helen picked the hymn.

Quick sidebar:
For her memorial service, Helen personally picked three hymns:

Come Holy Ghost Our Souls Inspire
which comes right after this homily;

Lift High the Cross, The Love of God Proclaim
which will our traveling hymn—and didn't Helen love to travel!

And during communion...
—make no mistake!--you are all invited to Helen's table!!
--Helen chose the deceptively other-worldly-sounding hymn,
Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence.

But when we sing that hymn
we will understand that the
experience of *heavenly* community
was not for Helen
an experience only scheduled for afterlife. No.

Helen, every Sunday, here,
witnessed what that hymn proclaims:
*Rank on rank the host of heaven spreads its vanguard on the way
as the Light of light, descending from the realms of endless day
comes the powers of hell to vanquish, as the darkness clears away.*

Helen was one very sweet and very tough cookie
precisely because she claimed
the promise of God's light-giving presence
for the living of every day of her life.
Here she heard the promise renewed, Sunday and Sunday.

And from here
she carried it with her
through thick and thin.

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Now.

The timing for this dinner party in Helen's memory
couldn't be more perfect.

Tomorrow is Pentecost. Big feast day.
One of the Church's Top Three.

Christmas.
Easter.
Pentecost.

More than feasts, on
each of these days
the curtain goes up on a kind of drama
in which all are players:
God, Jesus, The Holy Spirit,
You, Me, and
a cast of thousands.

For dramas like these,
there is a lot to prepare before the curtain goes up.
Choirs, dancers, musicians, actors
All warming up, tuning up, finding footing, remembering lines.

Like Christmas has its Eve,
and Easter has its Vigil,
Pentecost has this threshold time before
the Holy Spirit descends--with fireworks!

Annie Dillard, had it right in *Teaching a Stone to Talk*:
In church,
*"we should all be wearing crash helmets.
Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares;
they should lash us to our pews.
For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where
we can never return."*

Can't you picture Helen as an usher like that?

Wearing a crash helmet and handing out the life-jackets?
You couldn't choose a better friend than Helen
for support if you were standing on the edge
of something big and life-changing.

I am thinking of what Helen meant to all those graduate students
on the thresholds of their comps or the eves of their dissertation defenses.

I am thinking of what Helen meant to her patients at MGH
on the thresholds of life-altering surgeries.

I am thinking of what Helen's friends
meant to her as she stood on a string of thresholds—
the loss of her eye sight,
the diminishment of her mobility,
and the weeks she spent nearing the doorstep of death.

So, now, is the right time, God's time, Helen's time,
to remember Helen and to remember
the gift of the Holy Spirit that we share with Helen,
the gift God gives to keep us connected to the eternal source
of courage, strength and joy.

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Here.

Now.

In worship, in a space wrapped in red,
from the banners bursting with the Spirit to the tenting over our heads,
these monumental "swoops" of fabric that we have just heard from Chris Polari
were personally hemmed by Helen

Red.

Because

Helen looked great in red.

You can picture the ensembles

hat, jacket, blouse, skirt, and shoes to match.

And

some may remember Cardinal,

her car, her Spirit-mobile.

Red

to remind us of life

at its most vibrant, courageous, most spirited--and

most "Helen."

Red the color of blood.

Helen might have been viewed
as someone thin on blood relatives,
but
just look around!
Sisters, brothers, nieces, nephews, children—by choice and by the Spirit,
all of us kin in Helen's family.
Kin by another kind of blood,
the kind that flows
through veins of a more powerful friendship,
the eternal covenant in Jesus,
the bloodline that,
by the Spirit's power
will not run dry.

(a noise can be heard from outside the church, sounding like a train whistle).

Sounds like a train's a-coming, doesn't it? Bound for glory...
But we're not going to sing that one right now.

Please, Join me in singing with Helen—her hymn choice, here and now, for us:
Come Holy Ghost Our Souls Inspire...