

Gifted

As an avid movie-goer, I've been disappointed to see so many unoriginal films of late, so many sequels or spinoffs from older successful movies and shows. It seems Hollywood has exhausted its creativity and now can only hope to squeeze as much money as it can from prior successes. Now, I know sequels are hardly new. And in fact not all sequels are uninspired rehashes of the original. Some are good movies in their own right. Take the 1991 film *Hook*, which is a sequel of a sort. *Hook* recounts the story of Peter Banning, a cut-throat mergers-and-acquisitions lawyer, who has forgotten the life of adventure he knew as a child. Hardly an unfamiliar sentiment among the middle-aged. But what makes this loss so surprising is that Banning didn't have just any ole childhood. You see, before he was Peter *Banning*, he was...Peter Pan! After leaving Neverland, though, he'd forgotten who he was. But when his old enemy Captain Hook shows up, spoiling for a rematch, kidnapping Peter's children back to Neverland, Peter has to rediscover who he used to be.

This rediscovery is not immediate, however. Returning to Neverland, to his old gang, the Lost Boys, we learn that a new leader has emerged while Peter Pan was gone: Rufio. Together with the other boys, Rufio works to train Peter in the ways of adventure again, help him get into shape and reawaken his imagination. The climax of Peter's training comes the day he rediscovers he can fly. As Peter ascends into the sky, Rufio realizes the rightful leader has returned. He falls down on his knees before Peter and holds out to Peter Peter's old sword. Standing up, he says, "You are the Pan. You can fly, you can fight, and you can crow." Then he joins the other Lost Boys as they dance and crow around Peter Pan.

What strikes me about this scene is that it is an "ascension" scene. Not just literally, in that Peter Pan flies high above his gang. It's also a reclaiming of authority, Peter's "ascent to the throne" among his people. You see, Peter Pan's return isn't just about his own rediscovery, it is rallying and empowering for all the boys who looked up to him. As Rufio offers the sword, the Lost Boys are again united to their former days of glory under their legendary leader. They gather around him, because he is no longer Peter Banning, he is Peter Pan. And when Peter goes off to fight Captain Hook, he's not alone. Pan's ascent inspires and empowers the Lost Boys to join in his work in Neverland, with him as their leader. His presence both resides with them and transcends their experience. The Lost Boys now enjoy the authority of their soaring leader among them, and they can go out in confidence because their leader has been granted all authority, dominion, and power.

Ok, maybe you think the connection between Peter learning to fly and Christ's ascension is a bit of a stretch. And indeed the analogy breaks down if you push it too far. I mean, Jesus never forgot who he was, like Peter Pan did. But this scene illustrates an important aspect of Jesus' ascent into heaven, one we haven't touched on yet as we've looked at the Ascension these past

few weeks. Today, the Feast of Pentecost, we see one further consequence, one final implication of the Ascension: the empowering of Jesus' followers—us—to continue his work on earth.

St. Paul speaks to this in his letter to the Ephesians. In chapter 4, where our second lesson today comes from, he is talking about unity in the church, and he points to Jesus' ascension as the source of that unity. Then he cites Psalm 68 as a description of Christ's ascent: "When he ascended on high, he took captivity captive and gave gifts to his people."

What most readers don't realize, though, is that Paul isn't just quoting the psalm, he in fact changes it. As you see in your bulletins, Psalm 68 says that the Lord "*received* gifts" but here Paul says he "*gave* gifts." That's no small thing, this change. Was Paul misremembering the verse? Likely not. So why did he change it?

To answer that, let's look at the original psalm again. In the psalm we just read together, the author describes God as a king who has conquered his enemies and mounts a triumphant procession from Mount Sinai to "the holy place," emancipating his people, "leading captivity captive," and receiving gifts from both friend and foe. This was standard practice in biblical times—the king's loyal subjects would shower the triumphant king with gifts, as a sign of their joy at the king's accession. And his enemies, "those who rebel," would also bring tribute, to signal their acknowledgement of the king's legitimate rule.

We see an echo of this today in our practice of giving honorary degrees to politicians, literary successes, and other laudable people. We recognize they have "ascended" to a position of power or influence and so we honor them with symbolic gifts. To be sure, the gifts ancient kings received—gold and gems and the like—were far more valuable and exchangeable than a parchment degree, but the gesture is the same.

Moving now to Ephesians, we see Paul take that imagery of a king receiving tribute and apply it to Jesus, but in the process he turns the image around. Jesus, Paul affirms, *is* a triumphant king, who has through his death and resurrection, conquered his enemies (sin, death and the devil). And as a result he rightly deserves our tribute, our worship, and our reverent homage. But the ascended Jesus is not just the king who receives gifts, Paul argues, but the king who gives gifts. This makes Jesus unlike every other king, because he rules not by lording it over his people, but by inviting them to share in his self-giving, by inviting his people to enter more and more into a world of gifts, and then, as we are able, to use them in a working relationship with him.

Gift language is something we understand well enough. We begin as gift. We don't make ourselves. We don't birth ourselves. Our fundamental identity, our existence, is a gift. And immediately after we come into existence, we are given other gifts: gifts of love and food and clothing and shelter, gifts of healing and nurture and education and training. Everything we have and everything we are are gifts, ultimately from God.

And as we mature, these gifts gradually develop into strengths and responsibilities. I mean, we start out as infants, totally dependent on parents, but as children, we learn to dress and feed ourselves, make independent decisions, take initiative. In adolescence we make the critical transition from childhood to adulthood. It is an awkward and often turbulent time as we learn to

incorporate the gifts that we have been given into adult responsibilities, to use what we have been given wisely and well, for God. This is what it means to grow up, to grow into “the measure of the full stature of Christ.” It means accepting our place in God’s workforce, and seeing that work as a gift too.

In order to do this, though, we need Christ’s presence and power, his Spirit. Sure enough, Christ gave us his Spirit, his gift of himself, poured out his Spirit ten days after his Ascension, on the day of Pentecost:

“When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.”

Now, John has his own, less dramatic version of this event in his Gospel, which happens *before Jesus ascends*. But the account in Acts we just read makes more sense. For, only after Jesus ascended into heaven to fill all things was he in a position to give his people his Spirit, his continuing presence on earth. Only after his victorious ascent to his throne was he able to bestow the spoils of his conquest on his people.

Indeed, it’s clear that when we are talking about gifts from God, we are not talking about the kind of gifts you place on a mantle like a vase of flowers or use for our convenience like, say, a cell phone. They are not gifts to divert or entertain us, like a gift of tickets to an amusement park. Nor are they gifts of appreciation like anniversary earrings or a retirement Rolex. Rather, the gifts Jesus gives is the gift of himself, in the form of his Spirit working among believers.

What precisely these gifts are, Paul explains: “he gave that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors, and some teachers.” Apostles sent to form new communities; prophets to remind us of God’s dream for creation; evangelists to incite in us a desire for God; pastors and teachers to keep the story of God before the people and to shepherd them through conflict and struggle.

Notice that the gifts Paul lists are not abilities—apostleship or prophecy or teaching. They are rather apostles, prophets and teachers, pastors and evangelists. *Empowered* people, not disembodied powers, *enabled* persons, not impersonal abilities. The gifts God gives...are people!

This deserves our reflection. For, it reminds us that, while every good and perfect gift comes from God, the Incarnation shows us that good and perfect gifts come wrapped in flesh. Just as God came in the flesh, in Jesus, the Spirit is manifest through us, working in us and through us, through people.

And Jesus gives us these gifts so that we can be gifts to others, “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God.”

This is important to understand. Too often the gifts we receive from God have been understood individually, conferred on us to use as we see fit, according to our willingness and aptitude and inclination. I felt this way, growing up. I realized I had been given so many gifts—loving family, a living faith, a believing church, excellent education, visits to other countries on mission trips. But I was under the impression that, for whatever reason, God saw fit to bless me, and these gifts were for me to enjoy.

I was wrong. For, implicit in each gift is a responsibility. As the Germans say, “every gift (*Gabe*) is an assignment (*Aufgabe*).” To be given a gift is to accept responsibility for the gift we have received—to honor the giver of the gift by acknowledging, receiving, and using the gift in the Spirit in which it was intended.

And so while we usually celebrate Pentecost as the day the church received the gift of the Holy Spirit, we often forget what the Spirit is for. We forget that the gifts Jesus gives are ways in which we share in Jesus’ self-giving, in his work, in his heavenly rule. Apostles, evangelists, pastors, teachers, and prophets are not simply offices in the church. They are tasks, roles, callings each of us have as Christians. They are aspects of the work that is initiated at Pentecost, and that then spills into the world. Any one of us, at any one time, may be given any of these jobs. We are in on this together. This is not specialty work-- this is God’s community at work.

I started out recounting the scene in *Hook* when Peter Pan flies again, uniting and empowering the Lost Boys. In a similar way, Jesus’ ascension enables the unity and mission of the church, as the ascended Christ gives us the gift of himself, of his Spirit at Pentecost, to empower us to continue his work, to take up the next chapter of the epic story of salvation.

And while it is true that most sequels are repetitive and unoriginal, some succeed in advancing the story and expanding the vision of the first movie. That is what Pentecost is for us: Pentecost is the sequel to Easter, one that advances the story of salvation, expanding the scope of Christ’s mission to encompass the whole world, and at the same time involving us in that mission beyond what even Jesus did. Indeed, Jesus promised, “Whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father” (John 14:12).

That may sound strange or scary, being given that task, that responsibility. But we are meant for this, made for it. We are not meant to be subjects, passive and uninvolved. Rather, we have been called up into Christ’s mission, empowered and equipped to press Jesus’ just and gracious rule into the world. What a great honor that is! What a gift it is! Amen