

**May 24, 2015 (Pentecost)**

**TEXT: Revelation 7:9-12, Acts 2**

**TITLE: News from Pittsburgh: A Complex Trust**

It's been a quiet week in Pittsburgh. The weather has veered between hot and cold like a student driver nervously changing lanes on the highway. One day the heat is on; the next day you need air-conditioning, then back to the heater again. At least the weather gives us something to talk about, so we don't have to discuss local politics, like the feud between Rich Fitzgerald and Chelsa Wagner or explain how a deceased councilwoman won a recent primary election.

For Russ Carlson, it's been a mixed up kind of week. He hasn't gotten a lot of sleep lately due to the two pregnant women in his house. The first one is his wife, Amanda, who is in her eighth month and counting the days until their first child will be born. She's had a difficult pregnancy, including strong cravings for beer, which she is not allowed to drink. So she insists Russ drink the beers for her. Some days the cravings are so bad, he has to drink three bottles with Amanda watching every sip he takes with an envious, disgruntled gaze.<sup>1</sup> Then there is Daphne the cat, who turned out not to have been spayed and who gave birth to a litter of 4 kittens two days ago in a basket of clean clothes in the laundry room. One kitten didn't make it, which happens—but the surprise of its death and Amanda's emotional condition made it all a bit traumatic for everyone in the house. Russ had felt ill-prepared to be a midwife for the cat; he really felt unprepared to be a father to whatever Amanda was hiding beneath her maternity clothes. He would wake up early in the morning, his mind racing, unable to get back to sleep. So he'd go downstairs to read and think about life for a while.

Russ always read the big articles in the *Post-Gazette*—the latest news about Nepal or North Korea or the Islamic State. But lately he had been drawn to all the odd little articles that popped up on his iPad. Stories about the California man who tore a tendon in his hand because he'd played Candy Crush almost non-stop for six weeks straight. Or the story that came from north Bosnia in which a local man claimed that his home had been hit by no less than six meteorites. This was reported in the British Daily Telegraph. And as statistically improbable as that sounded, the meteorites were confirmed by scientists at Belgrade University, who were now studying whether strange magnetic fields existed over this man's house. The man had his own explanation for this strange occurrence. He said, "Well, I am obviously being targeted by extraterrestrials."<sup>2</sup>

Russ didn't know what to think about all this as he made his way to church that morning. Amanda was sleeping in. The cat and kittens were playing while he found something red to wear since it was Pentecost Sunday. Russ chatted with folks as he made his way to the sanctuary. They asked about Amanda; they shared their own mixed bag of stories—happy stories about babies and

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Mark Miodownik, *Stuff Matters*, 2014, p. 33.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3-4; *Daily Telegraph*, July 19, 2010.

graduations in their families, sad stories about funerals or cancer diagnoses; unusual stories (not about meteorites) like how one person they know still has a baby tooth in her mouth or how someone just got a singing telegram. (Honestly, do people still send singing telegrams?)

Russ was thinking what a crazy world we live in when the service starts and he hears the familiar Pentecost reading from Acts 2. There are the details about a rushing wind and tongues of fire and how the crowd thinks everyone is drunk even though it is only 9 o'clock in the morning. But his favorite part is when the preacher has to read off that long list of names—Parthians, Elamites, residents of Cappadocia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Libya and all the rest. The names are like pages out of an obscure stamp collector's album. Where are all these places? "Heck," thought Russell, "it's just as confusing today. There are tons of places I don't know where they are: north Bosnia, south Sudan, Azerbaijan, Namibia, Palmyra." Between his soon-to-be-born baby, the kittens, the beer, meteorites, and now all these Pentecost names, Russ left church feeling quite unsettled.

He decided to stop in Highland Park on his way home and see an old friend of his: an unusual guy—a piano-playing, Presbyterian entomologist named Virgil Carlson. Virgil was a bit of joker. When people would ask him about his family, he'd say, "My mother was a tough old bird. She buried three husbands and two of them were just napping." When people asked him about his name, he'd tell them he was named either after the American composer Virgil Thompson or the Roman poet Virgil—but since most people didn't know who either of those guys were, his explanation never helped very much.

When Russell pulled up at the house, Virgil was out on the front porch smoking a cigar. The odd thing was, Virgil didn't smoke. Russell walked up the front steps, shaking his head, and said, "Virgil, what are you doing with a cigar?" Puffing out a big ball of smoke, Virgil said in his Tennessee drawl, "Well, son, I've come to believe that when we get old, we need to acquire new vices. Otherwise God won't be interested in us. When you get to be as old as I am, sometimes you have to wave your arms at God to get his attention. I figured cigar smoking was as good a vice as any."<sup>3</sup>

Russ took a seat on the porch. Virgil could tell something was on the young man's mind. But he knew that Russ would eventually open up on his own, so he waited and rocked and puffed his Cuban cigar. After a spell, Russ said, "Man, life can sure be complicated. Between work and home, I just don't feel like I'm keeping up with things. There's Amanda and the baby and all the things I read in the newspaper or hear about on the Internet. My life just feels more and more out of control."

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Charles Baxter, There's Something I Want You to Do, 2014, p. 116.

Virgil put out his stogie and let out a sigh before he began to talk. “Russ, there’s no denying that the world is complex. Millions of things are happening right this very moment, and that’s just counting the biological stuff happening in your body while you sit here on my porch. You’ve got cells dying and regenerating; nerves firing, muscles twitching, tiny arm hairs reacting to the breeze, skin cells soaking up sunshine, rods and cones in your eyes sorting out light and shadows. Son, you think the world is complex—you’re complex! You’re a living, walking miracle, but it will make your head spin to think about it too closely.

“I watched an old movie the other day. It was called ‘Shine’ and it was about this Australian pianist named David Helfgott. The movie focused on Rachmaninoff’s Third Piano Concerto, one of the hardest pieces of music ever written. The concerto begins with a simple, almost childish melody. (Sing melody) Only five notes are used. For the first two pages, the pianist plays with both hands in unison. A 10 year old could learn the melody in a half hour. But then the number of notes doubles—from eighth notes to sixteenth notes, a continuous stream that flows for a few pages before things really pick up. The soloist moves from playing 8 notes a measure to 17 notes a measure to over 28 notes a measure. By the time the first two minutes of the concerto are over, the pianist has played over 1500 notes—and this devilish piece is 45 minutes long. That works out to over 30,000 notes, stacked in thundering chords, flying by in demonic runs. What are the odds that anyone could memorize that many notes or play them in the right order? It’s statistically impossible, and yet it happens all the time. Pianists master and perform the Rach 3 every year.

“At one point in the movie a piano professor is listening to Helfgott play the first movement. He admonishes him to hit the right notes and then he said something profound. He said ‘you’ve got to first learn the notes and then forget them if you want to play this piece.’ Now I can’t play that concerto, but I know what he’s talking about. Our hands can be trained to play the right notes—even 30,000 of them. But not if you try and tell the fingers to hit each separate note. You have to let go; you have to forget the notes and just make music. You have to trust.”

Russ wasn’t a pianist, but he thought about all those notes on the page—and then thought about his own life for the moment. He was aware of his body’s sensations as he sat on Virgil’s porch, how his dress shoes pinched a little and how he shouldn’t have had that second cup of coffee at the fellowship hour after church. He pictured Amanda at home, sitting at the kitchen table reading the paper, straightening out her stiff back or brushing toast crumbs off her pregnant belly. He thought of the kittens inside, the birds outside, the hundreds of houses in Pittsburgh, the thousands in Pennsylvania, the millions of these same details being played out across the world. How could you ever wrap your head around all these things? And here he was about to bring a child into this crazy, complicated, out of control world? It made him shake his head and wonder.

Virgil got up and looked toward the steeple of East Liberty Presbyterian Church, just visible beyond the elm trees. He said, "I'm glad you went to church this morning. Pentecost, isn't it? Some people like a personal Jesus—Jesus our friend, our therapist, someone who "walks with me and talks with me and he tells me I am his own." I prefer the crowd scenes. Jesus feeding 5000 people from a few loaves and fishes. Jesus doing his Sermon on the Mount, telling them to consider the lilies of the field, the birds of the air; for as the good book says, "*Are not two sparrows sold for a penny; yet not one of them falls to the ground apart from the Father. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.*"

"Russ, I prefer bible crowd scenes because I spend my life dealing with bugs and insects, and in relation to them, we're hopelessly out-numbered. There are 5000 species of mammals and 10,000 species of birds. But there are a million different kinds of bugs. Almost 80% of all species on earth are insects. There's good reason why biologists have said that God must be inordinately fond of beetles (H.S. Haldane). I've shown you the entomology collection at the Carnegie Museum. I helped organize some of those cases of insects. But every time I examine a new aphid or moth or dragonfly, I am struck by how complex our world is. I've spent my life studying insect species but I've only scratched the surface of that world. I practice the piano every day, but I'll never master all 30,000 notes in the Rachmaninoff concerto. But none of that fills me with dread; it energizes and excites me. It makes me happy, son.

"It's like those crowd scenes in the bible. 144,000 people before the heavenly throne. A great multitude that no one could count from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages saying '*Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to God forever and ever.*' It's not for me to understand how this all holds together – where all these people came from; how they learned to communicate with one another; heck, how they finally learned to live together without killing one another. It's not for me to master the details. I simply trust that God knows all the details of life – including my details. My job is to find ways to add my voice to that heavenly chorus - to play my note in the great song of life. Christian faith doesn't start with understanding everything. Christian faith starts with trusting God."

After a while, Russ drove home, parking his car in the driveway. He saw a fat beetle on the sidewalk, two butterflies by the azalea bush, and a bee buzzing around the corner of the porch awning. He smiled and thought of Virgil. He saw Amanda through the screen door, heavy with child, dangling a shoelace in front of two kittens near her feet. He thought of the multitude from every nation standing on their own porches, anxiously awaiting their own firstborn children, offering up their own prayers to God. You start with trust, not knowledge. You learn the notes, then you forget them, and happily join in life's melody of praise.

That's the news from Pittsburgh, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the Presbyterians are above average.