

“Spirit-Filled”

Valley Presbyterian Church – May 20, 2018

Pentecost Sunday

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Rev. John Wahl

Acts 2:1-21

Many of my fellow preachers tell stories about how they were asked to speak before the congregations, or even to give a sermon at their home church at a very young age. Maybe they didn't know at the time what their future calling would be, but somehow, mysteriously, the same Holy Spirit who breathed life into the early disciples on Pentecost was at work, moving in and through the church, to inspire a pathway forward.

I, on the other hand, never imagined that I would or could or might have any desire to be a preacher, especially at my home church. The pulpit at Calvin Presbyterian was literally very high up over the congregation, but the sermons were also very erudite and complex, with many references to theologians like Niebuhr, Moltmann and Schleiermacher. It seems that we, the congregation, were reminded almost weekly that our minister, the Rev. Dr. Searfoss, was a double-graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary; *the* school for Presbyterians.

When he was not standing in the pulpit, then, it was a different atmosphere. While I was away at college, the church began an early, “contemporary” service, which the Rev. Dr. Searfoss never led; it was left for the other staff members, or guest preachers, to take care of. Because of my field education commitments at other churches while I was in school, I had not worshipped at Calvin, at any of their services, since moving back to Louisville two years ago. But, they wanted to celebrate my graduation from Louisville Seminary with me, and invited me to come, when I could, and lead worship. And so, it was at this early service, on the morning of my seminary graduation, at the age of 28, on Pentecost Sunday, I first preached at Calvin.

When I arrived, I saw a few familiar faces, but was told that, usually, only about twenty people came to the early service. If I remember correctly, I think that because of family and friends, it ended up being more like thirty. I was supposed to preach from the pulpit – that high pulpit – from which for so many years I had listened to and failed to understand the sermons in that church. But I couldn't do it. Like I often still do here, I decided that instead of ascending the stairs to look and speak down to the congregation, I would instead step forward and stand with you as I preach. For, as someone told me long ago, a sermon hasn't been preached until it has both been spoken and heard.

On the first Pentecost that we read about today, an amazing thing happens. Not the coming of the Holy Spirit like tongues of fire, and not the fact that all those people who were there that day were able to hear the good news being spoken in their own, native language. Those are amazing, for sure; and as text describes it, bewildering. But the truly amazing thing that takes place that morning in Jerusalem is that Peter, standing with the other eleven disciples, decides to get up and preach.

The crucifixion of Jesus had left the followers of Jesus terrified and scattered. Then, his resurrection left them bewildered. But the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost left them inspired and empowered. They had re-gathered in Jerusalem, as the risen Jesus told them to, and – as we heard in last week’s reading – they “prayed constantly.” Before Pentecost, the disciples had failed time and again to fully recognize who Jesus was; even though he had traveled, healed, and taught with them for years. But on Pentecost, these same disciples become fearless leaders who could proclaim the gospel in front of both large crowds. They would go on from there to challenge the authorities, face persecution and imprisonment, form new faith communities, heal the sick and exorcise demons.¹

This miraculous transformation begins with what Acts 2 describes: the birth of the church, yes, but also the inspiration and empowerment of the disciples to bear witness to those who they stood before; and to the ends of the earth.

Peter delivers a sermon based on the words of the prophet Joel to explain to the crowd that they were standing in the center of a history-making, life-altering, world-shaping moment. The Spirit comes upon *all* people – men and women, young and old, from *all* language groups and cultures. *Everyone* can see visions; *everyone* can dream dreams. The Holy Spirit energizes a diverse community – people of *all* kinds, from *all* kinds of places – to proclaim a new and abundant life for *all*.²

That is exactly what is happening right now, Peter tells his stunned audience. God is pouring out his Holy Spirit on all of God’s children – the wind is sweeping through the room, like the breath of God that blew through Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones. Things that has been lying dead or dormant are now coming to life; like a fire, the Holy Spirit is spreading the love of God far beyond the streets of Jerusalem and into the hearts of people in all corners of the world.

If recollection serves, that is what I talked about during that first sermon at my home church, early on Pentecost Sunday, twenty-one years ago: the coming of the Holy Spirit. We often translate the word used on John’s Gospel for the Holy Spirit – *Paraclete* – as “Advocate” or “Comforter.” We imagine the Spirit easing encouraging us, easing our distress, coming to us in times of trouble to remind us of God’s presence and

¹ Doug Bratt from *Center for Preaching Excellence*

² Robert Williamson, Jr., “The Church is Not a Tower of Power”

promises. It's just that kind of comfort that is at the heart of Jesus' parting words to his disciples in John's Gospel. They were likely feeling distressed, orphaned and abandoned, and so needed that kind of comfort and advocacy.

But there's nothing particularly comforting about the rush of violent wind and descending tongues of flame. Once the disciples take to the streets of Jerusalem with their new multi-lingual ability, those who witness it are described as being "amazed" and "astonished." The Holy Spirit was not at that point comforting them, but creating a troubling, public proclamation that the one who had been put to death in that city was very much alive through the power of God.

"The Holy Spirit," writes David Lose, "is just as much an agitator as an advocate; as much provocateur as comforter."³ It is hard for us to capture, in one word, all these dimensions of the work of the Holy Spirit. That is why we talk of wind, which can be both a gentle breeze and a howling gale; and fire, which can illumine and warm or burn and destroy uncontrollably; and even breath, which can be almost imperceptibly quiet or life-giving, saving and preserving.

For times such as these – days when we give thanks for the graduates in our community, when we offer gifts through the Pentecost Offering to support ministries of youth and young adults, while mourning yet another school shooting – for days such as these, we contemplate the multiple meanings of the Holy Spirit. God is present with us, offering us comfort and peace, but God certainly is also moving within us, through visions and dreams, through bold acts of courage and crossing boundaries, to heal the sick and drive demons from our world. As the church, and as its members, we are called as to let the Spirit be our Advocate so that we might speak truth, strive for justice and work for a better world.

I see the *Need A Prayer?* initiative, where members at congregations are volunteering to spend an hour over this coming weekend testifying to the presence God's Spirit, as a wonderful opportunity for us. Here's how it's intended to work: using the on-line sign-up, pairs of people will take a time slot manning a booth that has been rented at the Blossom Time Festival by the Chagrin Valley Council of Churches. Anyone passing by can share a prayer request by writing it down on card and placing it in a box. All the volunteer needs to do is collect the cards, offer a smile and maybe engage in some conversation with those passing by who, hopefully, will know that God's Spirit is present – like the wind – comforting and advocating for them.

I hope that some of you from this church can have this kind of experience; that it won't be fear of not knowing what to say or what to do if you're asked to pray for someone out loud that stops you from signing up. You're welcome, if anyone asks you,

³ David Lose, "Come Alongside, Holy Spirit"

to assure that if they leave their contact information, a minister will get in touch with them. I hope that some of you who have been wondering and watching for opportunities for the church to move outside of its own walls will use this as a way to be the church in and for the world.

It's certainly appropriate to pray for the Holy Spirit's comfort and abiding presence. It is good and right to ask God to send the Spirit to restore order and separate us from danger. But Pentecost is also God's reminder that there is another side to the Spirit; where it blows around us and sets us afire; where it causes dreams to be dreamt and visions to be seen, where it inspires old and young, men and women, and people from all different places with the good news of God's mercy and grace.

Our job as the church and its members is to follow the movement of the Holy Spirit which empowers us. Our task is to embrace the great diversity which inspires unity, so that we might proclaim the renewing love of a God who speaks to each of us individually, in our own native voice; gifts each of us in different ways; and leads us to work to make the world in which we live a better place. AMEN.