

Spirit of Love and Power  
John 14:8-17, 25-27; Acts 2:1-21; Romans 8:11-17

Have you ever bent over and struggled to walk in a powerful, overwhelming wind? During the midst of Hurricane Agnes when Linda and I were still at Juniata College. We decided to walk onto the bridge that goes over the Juniata River – maybe not the best decision we ever made – but certainly a memorable one. The wind was so strong, we had to stoop over to brace ourselves as we struggled against the wind...Wind is a force that we can't see but we can certainly feel, which is much like the Holy Spirit, whom we celebrate today.

In Genesis 1, we read, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, now the earth was a formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light." The NRSV translates the "Spirit of God" as the "wind from God". The Hebrew word is *ruach* can be translated as wind, breath, or spirit. It sounds a bit like breathing, doesn't it?

In the Old Testament, we see the Spirit of God acting, revealing, and empowering. We see the Spirit of God hovering over the water, the holy and life-giving wind as a creative force. We see the Spirit giving power to leaders of God's people, inspiring them with courage or fortitude. We see a Spirit of prophecy filling God's servants with words from Yahweh and empowering them to act out Yahweh's calls for justice, mercy, righteousness, and right worship. When individuals were endowed with the Spirit, they were empowered to be prophets, priests, and kings. Jewish tradition considers these examples in the Torah to be a manifestation of God's power. In light of the New Testament, Christians interpret it as foreshadowing of the Holy Spirit.

Today is Pentecost, a defining moment, a water-shed moment for the people of God. You most likely heard Pentecost as being the birth of the church, though others may say that

Christ's Resurrection on Easter Sunday is more of a church birthday. Regardless of what the church's birthday rightfully might be, Pentecost is a rather strange and marvelous day for the followers of Jesus - with profound implications for who we are in Christ, and for what we are doing in this world.

We see in today's scripture that Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit and the promise was kept: The Holy Spirit came upon the disciples in Jerusalem, in rushing wind and tongues of fire. The Holy Spirit now dwells within all of Jesus' followers - revealing, transforming, mediating, and advocating for us. The Spirit of power and love witnesses to our hearts, makes us a new creation, gives us fellowship with Jesus, and empowers us to continue his work in this world. This is what we remind ourselves of at Pentecost.

In the Old Testament, we read that the Spirit was active in creation and also in empowering God's servants, leaders, and prophets. God's Spirit of power and prophecy did not touch every person, but it was able to influence the lives of God's people by empowering an agent for a certain task...But then, the Spirit dried up. The prophet Malachi was the last prophet after the exile.

When we start at the New Testament gospels, we meet the people of Israel at the end of a 400-year-long dry season of the Spirit. People are longing for a word from God...and longing for a Messiah. Some are looking ahead to the day of the LORD when, as the prophet Joel foretold, the Spirit would be poured out on all of the people of Israel (Joel 2:28). At the beginning of the gospels, when the Spirit begins to move in the midst of Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, and Joseph around the birth of Jesus, a renewal of the Spirit has begun. The 400 year Spirit drought is over.

After Jesus' birth, the gospels describe the role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' ministry. We see the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus like a dove during his baptism. It compels him to

go out into the desert and face a temptation for forty days and forty nights. Jesus returns home, heads to the synagogue in Nazareth, and reads from the Isaiah scroll saying, “The Spirit of the LORD is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor.” (Luke 4:18-19; Isaiah 61:1-2).

Jesus then begins his ministry, calling disciples, teaching about the Kingdom of God, healing the sick, welcoming the outcast, forgiving sins, raising the dead, casting out demons. All of his work was empowered by God’s Spirit.

Jesus knew that he would leave his disciples, since he was walking a road toward self-sacrifice, toward death on the cross, and resurrection. Because of this, Jesus began to teach the disciples about a whole new era of the Spirit. Our passage in John 14 occurs after the last supper, after Jesus has washed his disciples’ feet, and also after predicting both Judas’ betrayal and Peter’s denial. After saying a lot of difficult things, Jesus comforts his disciples: “Don’t let your hearts be troubled. I’m going to prepare a place for you. You know the way to the place where I am going” (Luke 14:1&4). Thomas asks, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way at?” (Luke 14:5). Jesus replies, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”(Luke 14:6)...Philip, whom we don’t hear a lot from in the gospels, asks another question, “Lord, show us the Father”. Jesus explains how there is a synergy between the Father and the Son, “I am in the Father and the Father is in me. If you know me, you know the Father. The things that I’ve been doing, they are from the Father”.

Jesus continues, saying how his followers will be empowered, “I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me, will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father... If you love me, you will obey what I command.

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever - the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you, and will be in you.”

Jesus teaches that he isn't going to leave his disciples alone - that they would have “another Counselor”. It is interesting that Jesus doesn't just say, I'm going to send you a Counselor, but that it is going to be another Counselor - meaning a similar presence and role to what Jesus has been in for the disciples. Jesus explains further, saying, “the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you”.

As Jesus prepares to be hung on the cross the next day, he tells his disciples they won't be alone, but that they will be empowered to do the same things he has done - and even more - through the Spirit that they will receive. Jesus tells them to obey his commandments and to love one other; and to not give up hope; there will be an counselor, to walk alongside them.

Jesus then is led away, goes to trial, is found innocent - but guilty of blasphemy for the things that he has done in God's name, and is eventually crucified by the Roman government. The disciples are distraught and their lives feel shattered, until early on the third day, when Mary Magdalene, Peter, and John see the empty tomb and Mary sees the risen Jesus (John 20:1-18). Jesus appears to the disciples later that first evening, and breathes on them, telling them to receive the Holy Spirit. Jesus teaches and instructs the disciples before ascending to heaven, giving them a mission and the expectation of the coming Holy Spirit, who will equip them for the task (Acts 1:1-11; Mt 28:16-20).

In our 2<sup>nd</sup> passage, from Acts 2, we see the disciples have indeed lingered in Jerusalem. It has been seven weeks since Passover and the city is once again overcrowded with Jewish pilgrims from all over the Roman empire. They have come to celebrate the Feast of

Weeks, the harvest of the first fruits of wheat, and the holiday which marked the giving of the Law through Moses on Mount Sinai. Jews from all over the Roman empire have made it to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Weeks.

On the 50<sup>th</sup> day after Passover, the Feast of Weeks, we see all of the disciples in the same place at the same time. Suddenly, the sound of a powerful wind comes and fills the entire house. If that isn't strange enough, images or "tongues" of fire appear on the heads of everyone there and everyone is filled with the Holy Spirit. People began to speak in different languages and it causes a commotion, drawing people in to hear their words. The Jews visiting from all over can understand the speaking in their own languages.

Some bystanders are amazed! Others think, those Jesus followers are drunk! So, Peter, the same Peter who denied Jesus, boldly stands up and starts to preach. "Really, we're not drunk because it's only 9 am. What's actually happening here is what the prophet Joel foretold so long ago: 'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will have visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy... And anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'" (Joel 2:28-32).

Peter proceeds to keep preaching about the death and resurrection of Jesus, and three thousand people become followers of Jesus that day. The Spirit is there, actively empowering the disciples to mission, and the gospel of Jesus spreads through the work of Peter, Paul, and many others, male and female. Throughout Acts, we see the Holy Spirit filling both Jews and Gentiles, women and men, young and old.

So, what exactly does this all mean for us, for followers of Jesus today? Most importantly, Pentecost reminds us that the Spirit that Jesus promised his disciples has come - and it has come to us as well. The Holy Spirit dwells within all who believe and follow Jesus,

joining us to Jesus and the Father. Another Counselor, like Jesus, is with us, walking with us, helping us, teaching us, and transforming our hearts. Transforming, re-creating.

In John and Acts, there are two beautiful allusions, images about the Spirit that take us back to Genesis and the creation story. Jesus breathing on his disciples, the rushing Spirit wind: these call to mind the first wind, that creative Spirit hovering over the waters, and the first breath that God breathed into the first human. Biblical scholars write that it is not coincidence that these images are here, but that the giving of the Holy Spirit is, in its essence, part of the re-creation, renewal, and restoration of humanity. This is an important part of the gospel that we proclaim.

We are crucified with Christ and raised with him, dead to sin and alive to God, and we are being brought to newness of life through the same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead (Rom. 8:11). We have new life through the Spirit.

The Spirit of God dwells in you. The Spirit of God dwells in me. This is a bewildering, astounding, head-scratching, jaw-dropping, and empowering truth. The Holy Spirit dwells in us: to witness to and reveal Jesus to us, to fellowship with our hearts, to encourage us through trials and suffering, to teach and transform us, and to empower us to continue Jesus' mission in this world.

May we know it and live in the Spirit's power, doing Christ's work in the world. Amen.

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