A Sermon for DaySpring

By Tiffani Harris

“*A Communal Spirit*”

Pentecost Sermon

Acts 2:1-21

June 9, 2019

It was a balmy morning, and the room was musty. The morning sun was beginning to peak through the window. The air was thick and there was not enough room for all of us. Crowded together, I could hear the person right next to me breathing deeply as we sat down. The city was bustling with pilgrims from all over the known land, visiting Jerusalem for the festival. For years, I looked forward to this feast of weeks, when we offer our first fruits back to God and thank Yahweh for provision of the wheat harvest. Also called Pentecost, as it is 50 days after Passover, and we recount God’s faithfulness in giving the Torah at Mt. Sinai. God came down in the fire, smoke, and thunder on the mountain to show us how to live and to covenant with the Israelites. It is a time of feasting, praying, and renewing our covenant with God. And yet it was different this time; Christ was no longer with us.

Our custom was to pray, even as Daniel prayed, three times a day, and so it was time for our morning prayer. (Venerable Bede) All of us were there -- not just the eleven but those of us who followed Christ as he walked, healed, and taught, including some of us women, Mary the mother of Jesus, and His brothers. There were about 120 of us – all together (Acts 1). Our Christ had told us to wait. So we waited, but we were not sure what we were waiting for. Jesus had mentioned a gift of the Holy Spirit, yet we could not quite imagine what that would look like or how we would recognize it.

Sitting on the floor in prayer, we heard what sounded like a strong, rushing wind beginning to blow. We wondered if a storm was coming, but the wind never actually blew! The sound of the wind filled the whole house **as if** a storm had come, but we could not see nor feel it, yet it was refreshing. **It was like nothing I had experienced before, so it is hard to describe**. We looked at each other and wondered. Then as if that wasn’t enough to capture our attention, we saw flames above each of us. It was not the kind that consumes, but a bright, warm light. It almost looked like a tongue resting as a crown on top of each person’s head. In an instant, it was glorious, and we were filled with wonder and awe. Then, without a moment to take that in, I realized I was hearing different languages being spoken . . . and then strangely, I realized that I, too, was one of the ones speaking. These were languages unknown to us. The refreshing sensation turned into a wonder-filled cacophony of sound.

Neighbors outside began to notice what was happening. Curiously they peeked in through the window, opened the doors and marveled. Pilgrims from all over began to hear us speaking about the glory of God in *their* own languages. We were all amazed. This was new. It was a perplexing; it was exciting and bewildering. Some were astonished; some questioned what was happening, and others were skeptical and who could blame them? As we considered what was happening, we turned to each other and to Scripture and recounted what Christ had taught us to help us understand. We began to realize that this was something more significant than we could imagine. Strangers joined us in amazement and curiosity. A new work and a new era was beginning.

I have often wondered what it might have been like to be there at Pentecost when the spirit of God literally blew in**, filling this unlikely community, and birthing the church**. While the Jewish followers of Christ were there for the Jewish celebration that they also called Pentecost, which is celebrated 50 days after Passover, the Spirit came establishing a new Pentecost for the church, 50 days after the resurrection. Throughout Scripture, we have seen the work of the Spirit of God at work many times. This outpouring of God’s spirit reminds us of those theophany events – visible manifestations of God to humanity. **God was in the storm, the thunder, fire, and smoke** on Mt. Sinai for Moses and the Israelites. God was in the still small voice that came **after** the earthquake, the wind, and the fire for Elijah on that same mountain. The Spirit descends upon Christ at his baptism in the form of a dove. Like an ordination or a commissioning, God blesses Christ, at the beginning of his earthly ministry.

Here in Acts, we see a similar outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the disciples **ushering in a new mission and a new era for the disciples, for the church, and for us.** As theologian Willie Jennings puts it, the time of joining and expansion has begun. The Spirit is not controlled by us; it is outwardly seeking. This promised gift of the Spirit brings peace out of the chaos. Just as the Spirit or R*uach* of God hovered over the waters of in creation, **so the spirit comes hovering over the chaos of our world**. Flames that resemble tongues blessed and ordained this infant church to spread the **peace of Christ in all places**. In the diversity of cultures and languages, all hear God’s word, and the Spirit draws others in. The *Ruach* blows into chaos creating unity out of the diversity in this extraordinary display of God’s power and spirit. *Ruach* is the Hebrew word for the Spirit of God. Its foundational meaning is “moving air” – whether a breath or a breeze or a violent storm. It is the *Ruach* or breath of God that gave life to Adam in Genesis. In Greek, the word is *pneuma*. **This very Spirit, the enlivening breath of God is now given to the church for the glory of God in all places.**

It was not a neat and tidy experience. Some were perplexed and amazed and others skeptical even dismissing this event as having nothing to do with God. It is easy to be critical of the naysayers. How could they not see that God was doing something new? After all, it had been promised many times. But, don’t we have similar reactions today? Let’s face it – we can be a skeptical people. Inappropriate use of “God told me this” has led many to distrust any similar language about how we see and talk about God and God’s work. Damage has been done in the name of Christ and so we have a holy fear of how we talk about God. What we see here, is that the Spirit of God comes to the community for the sake of God’s glory. **This is not an individual experience but a communal one. It happens in community, is discerned in community, and it is for the furtherance and expansion of the community of God.**

In their amazement, this larger group of disciples, both women and men, discerned that God was fulfilling prophecy as declared by the prophet Joel, and that **this** experience was the gift promised by Christ. Together, they realized that all was being turned upside down. **The great family of God was being expanded and redefined. Sons and daughters prophesy, the young have visions, and the old dream dreams in almost a reversal of norms**. A transformation was beginning to take place. The church was born in this moment with transformative power to accomplish its mission so that “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.” This is the **new covenant** that Christ talked about. The first covenant, initiated at Sinai with fire and wind, was with the children of Israel and the new covenant is with God’s church. Only possible with the transformative power of the Spirit of God, the great joining and expansion has begun.

**In Acts, the Holy Spirit blows in** to new and unexpected places for ministry for the sake of community – the old have dreams and hope. In unanticipated ways, the young have visions and wisdom, women and men tell about the works of God. This same Spirit has been at work in Scripture beginning with the Torah and the Psalms. The psalmist often refers to the Spirit as wisdom and the breath of God. John helps us to understand the Spirit of God as the very presence of Christ in Christ’s physical absence. The Holy Spirit is teacher, comforter and advocate and ushers in the peace of Christ. In the letter to the Romans, the Holy Spirit is a spirit of inclusion and adoption. Paul also reminds us in his letters that the Holy Spirit develops gifts within the body of Christ for the sake of the building up of Christian community**. As no one word** or description fully defines what the Spirit means for us**, Acts paints a picture** describing in detail the evidence of the Spirit at work in the life of this young church. This Pentecost event is vivid and seems extravagant. We are tempted to think that the Spirit **just does not work like** this anymore. So, we wonder what can this mean for us today?

We need the Holy Spirit. We are made for community (Elizabeth O’Connor), and **we need the breath of God to blow in and bring unity in the midst of our diversity**. Our lives are often disjointed and the spirit of God can build bonds, create bridges, and join us to each other. We need the Holy Spirit to transform our weariness into action, strengthen our wills, slow us down for listening, and help us to carve out time for the purposes of God. The Spirit of God breathes new life into the ordinary. In an age of skepticism, God’s spirit can renew our vigor for listening to Scripture in community and quell our doubts about the purpose of prayer**. While we are made for community, it is hard work**. It is only through the Breath of God that the church can embody the Peace of Christ. We cannot do this on our own.

How can we be open to the Spirit in our own lives and in the life of the church? In our society of instant gratification: Instagram, instant messenger, instant downloading. We need the Holy Spirit to train us to wait, and slow down before God. **It takes intentionality to be open to the Spirit of God. Discernment takes time, and it really can seem inconvenient.** Listening in community, with others, takes us back to Scripture and provokes us to wait and reflect. We often say the prayer; *Lord open our eyes so that we may see and our ears so that we may hear*. Seeing and hearing with the eyes of the Spirit, can result in **recognizing a call from God that may be uncomfortable.** It may be a call to repentance, to change, to reconciliation, to discipline, to action, or to rest. It is often not easy, and this is why opening ourselves to the Holy Spirit is a communal act. We need each other to help discern and to follow through.

Brother Lawrence wrote *Practicing the Presence of God* in 1895, to help others learn the discipline of noticing God at work in and around them. **Although we may not see the Holy Spirit enlivening our speech in other languages very often,** God’s spirit is still working and moving, transforming and joining. This summer we will hear from some of us in the congregation, as Becky shared today, about how they might have noticed God at work in and around them. Brother Lawrence, urges those he mentors to be patient with themselves as he says **“in the beginning, it will seem like you are wasting time” -- as you open your eyes and ears to the work of God**. Seeking God and opening ourselves to the Spirit takes effort as it conflicts with how we have been trained by our culture.

As a church, we make effort to create space for God’s Spirit. On Wednesday evenings this summer, all who wish are welcome to come together for centering prayer. It is a time of listening to God together in silence. I have found it is much better to do this with others. We learn, practice, listen, hear Scripture, and reflect together. During spiritual formation on Sunday mornings, we gather together to open our eyes and our ears to hear what God might have to say to us through Scripture and the parables in Luke.

Creating space for the Holy Spirit to move, convict, open our eyes and change our wills is inconvenient to our modern sensibilities. But make no mistake, the Spirit of God is moving in what Dwight Judy calls a “Quiet Pentecost” in our churches today. It may not be in the flames of tongues from Pentecost, but God is still transforming lives for the sake of his glory in the church. We are invited to participate. **In small groups, and through relationships, the Spirit of God is renewing lives one by one. It always seems to involve others, prayer, and Scripture.** We have to create space for it and make ourselves available to see and hear.

A mother dove has found my hanging flower basket on the patio to be her favorite spot for building a nest and laying eggs. Just when I think she is done and the babies have flown the nest, she is back again with more eggs. Yesterday, I heard and then saw a lot of commotion in the nest and then watched as the mother dove tried to teach her young to fly. She called to them and flew to the fence, turned and faced them and called to them again. They didn’t want to leave the nest. The father bird did the same thing. They flew back to the nest called to them and repeated the process. Over and over they flew to the fence calling their young to come to them, and eventually one brave little bird took flight and was free to explore the world. This mother dove, no doubt, has done this many times before from my basket. and I had missed it. But yesterday, I saw it. To open our eyes and notice requires intentionality. Opening ourselves to God in community is the same way.

When our wills and energy **fail** us, the Spirit of God can take our listlessness, our doubt, and our apathy and breathe new life . . . if we are willing. We may need to wait in the upper room for a while and listen. **We will no doubt need the church community to walk with us and sharpen us. It is for this very community that the gift of the Spirit has come and continues to come** – so that God may be glorified in our lives and in the church.

The joy of Pentecost is that we have a new vision and hope for Christian community. The Peace of Christ shared through the Holy Spirit blows over the chaos of our world and our lives bringing new life and joining in surprising ways.

Today we have so much to celebrate. It is one of my favorite days of the church calendar. It is the birthday of the church. We remember how the church was born when the Holy Spirit **transformed the lives of ordinary people and created a community in the midst of diversity.** God’s Spirit is still at work among us, in us, and in the church today. In small groups, God is drawing people together, God is renewing lives and bringing about reconciliation. In listening to Scripture in community, **God is still calling us to be about the ministry of God in this place, in our community, and in our world**.

With Pentecost the Holy Spirit provides the transformation and bolstering we need to continue to share the Easter hope of Christ’s resurrection. Pentecost is a story of a miracle – of God at work, enabling the church to act with boldness, hospitality, and discernment. **And it’s an invitation to us today. So, may it be with us today, that the Holy Spirit will enliven our hearts, invigorate our wills, create unity in the midst of diversity helping us to discern the work of God among us.**

Hear now the words of Christ in one of his last instructions from the Gospel of John: “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

Please pray with me: Mighty God we praise you for the blessing and gift of your Spirit. Enliven our hearts, renew our vigor, open our eyes so that we may see glimpses of your Spirit at work around us and strengthen our wills so that we may join you in being a part of your redeeming work. Give us courage to hear and respond to you. We seek your transforming Spirit in our community for the sake of your glory. Amen.

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