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John 20:19-23; Acts 2:1-21

MEDITATIONS ON THE HOLY SPIRIT

Pentecost is when the Christian Church celebrates the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Bible gives us two very different accounts of the giving of the Holy Spirit. The account many of us may know best comes from the Book of Acts. In this version, the giving of the Holy Spirit is very public and very dramatic. There is a violent wind and tongues of fire rest upon Jesus' disciples. They begin speaking in languages they didn't know and, upon hearing all the noise, a crowd gathers. And the crowd can understand what the disciples are saying even though the disciples are speaking in languages unfamiliar to the crowd. And then Peter stands up and gives a very passionate sermon about Jesus to this crowd of onlookers.

But there is another story in the Bible about the gift of the Holy Spirit. We read that passage from John's gospel. I think of it as the softer side of Pentecost because unlike the Acts story, this account from John is quiet and private. Jesus appears to the disciples on the evening of his resurrection. And he breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." And that's it. It's a very quiet experience.

I'm glad we have both versions of the giving of the Holy Spirit because the two of them together offer us a more complete picture of how the Holy Spirit engages us. Sometimes we experience the Spirit in dramatic ways and sometimes our encounters with the Spirit are so gentle we may not even be aware of what has taken place.

We Presbyterians believe in one God who engages us in three significant ways: as the Creator, as the Christ, and as the Holy Spirit. We refer to this as the Trinity. Of the three persons of the Trinity, some may find the Holy Spirit the hardest to relate to. The Creator and

the Christ can be thought of in relational terms: as Parent or as friend. We may have images of them in our heads, however incorrect those images may be (God is not a white male; Jesus is not blond and blue-eyed). But the Holy Spirit can be harder for us to imagine.

We are even confused as to what pronoun to use for the Spirit. Referring to the Spirit as “it” only reinforces the Spirit’s remoteness to us. Because the Hebrew word for Spirit is a feminine noun, I today will refer to the Spirit using the female pronoun “she” with the hopes that it will help make the Spirit a bit more relatable. The image that Christians began using to help us imagine the Spirit was a dove. We see that image here on our banners today. It’s an image given to us by scripture. When Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan, scripture tells us that the Spirit descended on him “like a dove.”

I think the dove can be a helpful image because a bird is alive and on the move—just like the Spirit of God. In the song we are using for part of our meditation this morning, the song refers to the Spirit using the pronoun “she” (she comes sailing on the wind) and imagines her as a soaring bird who journeys through the biblical stories and on into your life and my life today.

Before his crucifixion, Jesus comforted his followers with the promise that even though he would no longer be with them in person, God would not abandon them. God would send them the Holy Spirit. And that is what we celebrate today. God is with us in this mysterious and wondrous presence we call the Spirit. And this Spirit sails into our lives, like a bird on the wind, to guide us, comfort us, motivate us, energize us, and help us in our journey through life and faith.

There are some Christians who feel the Spirit’s presence with them every day and are filled with her power and strength. Some Christian traditions highlight the Spirit in their services, and worshippers get caught up in the dramatic presence of the Spirit’s power. Like the

story from the book of Acts, sometimes the Spirit comes upon us like a violent wind and tongues of fire and we may be overcome with its presence. Sometimes we *know* the Spirit is with us. And sometimes we do not. But it is there nonetheless.

When the pandemic hit, many people stuck at home began baking bread. But not me. My pandemic hobby focused on the birds. I began setting up bird feeders all around our house. And I had one specific goal. I wanted to attract hummingbirds. I knew that getting hummingbirds to come to my urban yard was a challenge because I had tried before and had failed. But I told myself, this time I would succeed. So I set up my hummingbird feeder and tended it with great devotion. I kept it clean and kept it filled with fresh nectar. But nothing came. Day after day after day—no birds. Despite the feeder, despite having all the right kinds of flowers in my yard, no hummingbirds ever came.

At this time during the pandemic, I was recording sermons at home and posting them to YouTube. So when it came time to celebrate Pentecost, I decided to record my sermon on my back deck early one morning. I was using the theme of birds to discuss the Holy Spirit, and I thought it would be nice to be on the deck where the viewers could hear the early morning birds singing. After I recorded the sermon, I went inside and reviewed the video. And partway through my sermon, something flashed across the screen and hovered for an instant just behind my head before streaking away. I immediately reversed the video and watched it again, and hit “pause” when the image appeared. And there she was: a hummingbird, hovering just over my head for a nanosecond. And then she was gone. And I never even knew she was there.

Sometimes our experience with the Holy Spirit is as unseen by us as being photobombed by a hummingbird—a holy, mysterious visitation by God, blessing us in unknown ways. Sometimes our experience with the Holy Spirit is as gentle as being breathed on by Jesus.

When we are touched by something of beauty, there is the Spirit. When we are blessed by someone's kindness, there is the Spirit. When help comes to us when we most need it, there is the Spirit. When we are supported and cared for during a difficult time, there is the Spirit. When we are moved to act with generosity, to offer forgiveness when it is especially hard, there is the Spirit. When we do something we never imagined we could do, or when we offer words of support to someone else and we aren't even sure where those words came from, there is the Spirit. Sometimes it may be only in retrospect, years down the road when we look back on moments in our lives, on how we made it through a hardship, or how we were offered support, or how we found the courage to do something, and we realize, "Oh, there was the Spirit and I never even knew she was there."

Today we are going to explore the gift of the Holy Spirit through some short meditations. In each meditation time, we will read in unison a portion of the Presbyterian Brief Statement of Faith about the Holy Spirit to highlight some aspects of what the Spirit does in our lives. And then we will have a short moment—about a minute—to reflect on a question I will pose. You can reflect in silence or if you feel moved by the Spirit, you can speak out your thought. And then we will close that section with the singing of the song in your bulletin: *She Comes Sailing on the Wind*. Rebecca and Kelly will sing the verses and we, the congregation, will join in in the refrain. And then we will repeat this all again.

1 The Spirit justifies us by grace: means we don't have to earn God's love. We are given it as a gift. Are we broken? Yes. Are we flawed? Yes. Do we do things, say things we regret? Yes. But we do not have to be perfect to have God's love. The Spirit sets us free to accept

ourselves. Think about what a great gift that is! And then we can accept the imperfect people around us because they too are loved by God.

Can you think of ways or occasions when the Holy Spirit has set you free to accept yourself or another human being?

We give thanks for the Holy Spirit!

2 The same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles, the same Spirit we read about in the Bible, is the same Spirit who is in your life and mine today. If you notice, each verse of the song *She Flies On* recalls an occasion in Scripture where the Spirit made an appearance and then in the refrain we sing, “she comes sailing on the wind, her wings flashing in the sun, *on a journey just begun*, she flies on.” On a journey just begun. That means that the Spirit’s activity is not confined to the pages of the Bible. She flies from the biblical stories straight into your life and mine. And her presence then makes your life and mine holy. Your life becomes the next chapter of holy scripture, detailing the Spirit’s activity. Our lives, our most ordinary days and tasks become sacred because the Holy Spirit is with us. And she claims us and loves us, sustains us, and calls us to live as Christ’s followers.

Can you identify some way the Spirit is flying into your life or into our world at this time?

We give thanks for the Holy Spirit!

3 We are told that the Spirit gives us courage. Courage is something we all need to live out our faith. The statement we read says we even need courage to pray. Did you ever think you

needed courage to pray? But in a world that can demoralize us, depress us, and render us cynical and jaded, praying can be a radical act of faith and courage.

Where do you need the Spirit to give you courage in your life: whether it is to pray, to hear the voices of those long silenced, to speak the truth, to work toward personal healing, to strive for justice, freedom and peace?

We give thanks for the Holy Spirit!

4 The world we live in is a broken place—with a lot of cruelty, corruption, and pain. Our lives can be broken places—with a lot of heartache, failings, and pain. But even so, the Spirit empowers us to live holy and joyful lives because she helps us be part of God's goodness and love in our daily tasks. In our daily tasks. Even as we wait for God's new heaven and new earth, even as we long for God to heal our brokenness, even as we deal with heartache and pain, even still, in this moment of our lives, the Spirit enables us to live holy and joyful lives.

In the midst of our less than perfect lives and less than perfect world, what can you identify in your life or in our world that is holy and joyful?

We give thanks for the Holy Spirit!

5 The Spirit helps us know that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God. We will not be abandoned. The Spirit is with us. She is right beside you, right within you, all around you.

As you consider a difficulty you face in your life right now, how does knowing that nothing can separate you from God's Spirit of Love affect how you feel about the present and the future?

We give thanks for the Holy Spirit!