

Rev. Rebecca Jess

May 19, 2024

Inspired by the Holy Spirit Acts 2:1-21

Today is what we call Pentecost. Pentecost was originally a harvest festival for the Jewish people, but eventually it became a commemoration of when God gave Moses the law at Mount Sinai, and it was celebrated 50 days after Passover. This is the reason, in our scripture, we hear that so many Jewish people were gathered together in Jerusalem; they were pilgrims who had journeyed there for the Pentecost celebration. And the disciples were there among them. Before ascending to heaven, Jesus had told them to wait in Jerusalem for the promised blessing: the arrival of Holy Spirit.

And so, as we also heard in our scripture today, something happened on Pentecost all those years ago that shifted the focus from harvests and Moses and commandments, to a focus on the Holy Spirit. The Spirit had come down upon Jesus at his baptism, empowering him in his ministry of teaching, healing and forgiveness. It was a new way of living, a new creation; one where, as we heard in our baptism today, Jesus lifts up a way of living that encourages love over hate, compassion for all life around us, forgiveness and grace, and the pursuit of justice and reconciliation over retaliation. In others words, a new creation where, through Christ, we see life where there was once death. And now, at the time of Pentecost when all the disciples had stayed in Jerusalem and gathered together in one place, the Spirit comes upon them, as well.

The Holy Spirit can be a difficult part of our triune God to define. We know how to describe God our Creator: the one who made heaven and earth, made the shining sun and every waterway, made animals and birds and creatures of all kinds, made humans in God's own image. We know how to describe Jesus: the Son of God who was born a baby on this earth and grew to be a teacher, a healer, and a friend; a compassionate leader who cared deeply for *all* those he encountered, not just a select few. But how do we describe the Spirit?

Well, the Hebrew word for Spirit is *ruach*. *Ruach* refers to a number of different things, but what all those things have in common is *energy*. *Ruach* is the invisible wind energy that makes tree branches sway and hair sweep in front of our eyes and wind chimes tinkle. *Ruach* is also breath. Take a deep breath right now. Feel that energy and vitality running through you? That's *ruach*. And that breath of the Spirit was first breathed out onto God's creation at the very beginning, and it breathed life into humans, too. So we understand *ruach* as wind and breath, but this word is also used to describe God's presence: an energy that dwells in each of us and flows out from us as we use that energy, that Spirit, to navigate through this world. Just as wind and breath are invisible, the Spirit is invisible. But, we know wind to be powerful, and the Spirit is similarly powerful. And just as breath keeps us alive, so the Spirit sustains all of life.

So, here we have the disciples, gathered together in a house in Jerusalem, perhaps still a bit fearful of how to move forward without Jesus right there beside them, or perhaps eager for this promised blessing to just arrive already so they can get out into the world

beyond Jerusalem. We can't know what they were thinking or feeling exactly, but we do know they were waiting for something to arrive and move things in a new direction. And, wow, does something ever arrive. Some of the words we commonly use to describe the Spirit are “comforter” and “guide” and “advocate.” We see images of the Spirit represented through white doves in flight and beautifully slanted sunlight and droplets of water and gentle breezes. But the promised Spirit doesn't arrive that day with a gentle, breezy nudge, or in the small, warm glow of candlelight, or with a peaceful yet renewing song of freedom. No, the Spirit arrives with a reminder of God's power; this promise isn't meek and mild, it is energy, movement, change, surprise, awe, transformation, and life itself.

Those disciples probably didn't know what to expect, but I wonder if what came upon them was anything close to what they thought would happen. The Spirit arrived with a noise so loud and violent that it filled the entire house. Fire appeared, and not in a fire place or in an oil lamp, but as flames dancing above each person's head. And as if that wasn't enough, when the disciples opened their mouths to talk to one another they discovered they were able to speak in a multitude of languages. The Jewish people who were there with them in Jerusalem, no matter where they came from, could hear their own language, their own specific dialect, being spoken.

Because we commemorate Pentecost every spring as a new season within the church year, many of us have probably heard this story before and aren't particularly surprised by it. We know about the wind and the flames and the languages and how it brought together people from a wide variety of locations to hear about God's deeds of power. But can you imagine what it would have been like to be there yourself? To have heard that wind? To have seen those flames? To have suddenly spoken a different language? To have left that house with that kind of powerful energy coursing through you? The reaction from those who witnessed all these different languages being spoken wasn't one of general interest or curiosity: we're told that the crowd was bewildered, amazed, astonished, perplexed. They openly asked “What does this mean?”

Haven't we all been in situations where we ask the same question, “What does this mean?” How often do we experience God's strange ways of working in the world as confusing, overwhelming, or even negative? How often have we not really understood what was happening until much later, once we had the time, the space, the mental capacity to stand back and observe the story arc with greater detail.

As Margaret Atwood writes in her book *Alias Grace*:

“When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else.”

Sounds a bit like the experience held by those at Pentecost, doesn't it? And likely sounds like situations within our own lives. When we're in the confusing, disorderly, and

perplexing middle and can't see how the story will resolve, we are like those at Pentecost asking, "What does it mean?"

"What does it mean?" asks the immigrant or refugee who has gone through many challenges to move to Canada, but still has so far to go in terms of reuniting with family members they had to leave behind, or finding permanent housing, or securing a decent paying job.

"What does it mean?" asks the newly retired person who was recently diagnosed with some sort of illness or disease that will change the way they lead their daily lives.

"What does it mean?" asks the parent of a teenager who doesn't want to connect with them in any meaningful manner and seems to be slipping away.

"What does it mean?" asks the community that has to be evacuated for a second time due to wildfires and whose children are so consumed with the affects of climate change that they already live with anxiety and fear around what the future holds.

"What does it mean?" asks the church congregation that has watched its numbers dip and dwindle to the point where keeping their beloved church building seems an impossibility. Can they keep being the church in the world if they have nowhere to meet?

In the chaos of being in the middle of all these stories it's difficult to wait for things to start making sense. In our impatience, we may even start misinterpreting what's going on. This is what happens on that first Spirit-filled Pentecost: those who don't want to ask the question "What does it mean?" instead assume that everyone is drunk. But Peter confirms for everyone listening that what is happening isn't drunkenness. It is really and truly God's Spirit being poured out upon all people. The Holy Spirit does not exist in just one time or place or person, but in all times, all places, and all people. Peter provides a new interpretation of the events explaining that these people aren't filled with wine, but with God's Spirit. He explains that what is happening, though it may be bewildering or perplexing or so astonishing that it almost seems unbelievable, is in fact the fulfillment of God's promises. God's people are dreaming dreams and seeing visions. They're *imagining a better world*—that new creation that Jesus set into motion.

When we're in the messy middle of our stories and find ourselves asking, "What does it mean?" perhaps the best follow up question is "What is the Spirit *doing*?" Because, as we've seen, the Spirit isn't the forgettable third wheel of God. And the Spirit doesn't just move and work in light-hearted gentle breezes and doves-in-flight kinds of ways. The Holy Spirit is active; it's *doing* things. It's giving abilities we didn't think we had in us, but in those times when we need it most, we realize we can do so much more than we thought. It's pushing us out of our comfort zones, making us wonder and consider and think and experience new feelings when it might be easier to just stick with the status quo. It's taking us from the wilderness of our lives and bringing us into community with those who will journey with us, who will listen to us, who we can learn from and teach in

return. It's making us see God's promises and vision come to life. It's making us imagine a better world.

Perhaps most importantly, though, to live inspired by the Holy Spirit means living with hope. And hope is different from optimism. Optimism is looking at a situation and being convinced that everything will be just fine. And, absolutely, there is a place for optimism in our world. But what optimism tends to gloss over is the very real struggles and hardness of life. That's where hope comes in, because the story of God and God's people runs deeper than the plot points we see in front of us. Hope is knowing that there is more to the story than meets the eye. Hope is knowing that death—or what can feel like death—does not mean the story is finished.

Take those first followers of Jesus as an example—they probably thought their stories were pretty set: catch fish; collect taxes; and in the case of the women, have children and tend to the household. But once they met Jesus their stories changed. They asked “What does it mean?” and kept following to find out. And when Jesus was arrested and put on trial their story changed again, and again they wondered “What does it mean?” And this continued when Jesus died a terrible, painful, humiliating death. The story kept on changing and they became swept up into something deeper and more meaningful than the trajectory they originally saw themselves on. They were in a shifting storyline that never really ended, at least not with death. They kept following and wondering. They received the Spirit. That invisible energy and power of God, of Christ, was in each of them. Which, to be clear, didn't make the story suddenly easier. In the story of Acts there are still imprisonments and shipwrecks and persecution. The difference was they had an energy within them that inspired hope, and that hope ran deep. They didn't keep faith in God based on how charmed their lives were in the moment, rather, they believed that no matter how their stories unfolded, there is hope in the God of an empty tomb; hope in a God whose Spirit empowers with both gentleness and wild wind and flames.

Being filled with the Spirit isn't a one-time event, it is ongoing. We are constantly changing according to the Spirit's leading. So, take a deep breath. Feel the energy and vitality of the Spirit fill you. Don't be afraid to ask “What does it mean?” Take time to wonder about what the Spirit is doing; seek its active presence all around. Because the way the story will play out may not be obvious right now, but you can be assured that as we all imagine God's better world, as we invest in hope, as we engage with the power of the Spirit, the story cannot end in death, the story leads to new life.
Amen.