

Holy Spirits
John 2:1-12, Acts 2:1-13
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One of my youth was sobbing in my arms. We had just wrapped up worship at the end of a retreat, a time when many of the youth had shared their thoughts on the scripture we had been studying and had also shared from their own experiences. As soon as the worship ended, she found me and let the tears run and tried to explain to me what she was feeling. She could barely get any words out, and I could barely understand them, but the best I could appreciate, she was saying something like “I want this”...with, of course, no explanation as to what “this” was or why she might want it.

Encountering a youth this fervent and adamant about “wanting this” was not something that happened to me often. I’m an introverted guy who doesn’t typically display a lot of emotion outwardly, and the youth program I led did not lend itself toward big dramatic statements of faith or watershed moments like this one...so when this student found herself overwhelmed by the experience, I paid attention.

When the Spirit swoops down upon us, we pay attention.

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Today is the Christian holiday of Pentecost. Throughout most of our Easter worship services, we’ve been acknowledging a transition of sorts, from Jesus being present on Earth in human form to the arrival of an advocate, the accentuated presence of the Holy Spirit. Once Jesus has re-ascended to heaven, the disciples and all of Jesus’ followers will have only the Holy Spirit left to guide them. It is a somewhat daunting task, and yet there is a lot of comfort in knowing that even in Jesus’ absence, we are not alone.

Pentecost is the day when we celebrate one of the most prominent entrances of the Holy Spirit. The story in the second chapter of the book of Acts is one of the most dramatic post-gospel texts in our Bible. There is a violent wind from heaven that surges through the assembled crowd despite the fact that they are indoors. Tongues of fire appear and rest upon the individuals who have gathered. Then there is a fantastical description of everyone speaking normally, in their own language, but being heard and understood by others in their own language. The Holy Spirit serves as a universal translator for all who are gathered, and to emphasize the impressiveness of this feat, Acts lists three verses worth of nationalities who have gathered together.

When we talk about the Holy Spirit, we typically talk about her in one of two ways.¹ The first is a mystical, everpresent-but-easy-to-overlook manifestation of God. She is less concrete than Jesus, who took our form and ate our food and spoke to us with a human voice. The Holy Spirit tugs at our hearts and nudges us towards goodness. She is the part of our conscience that

¹ One of my congregants objected to my use of female pronouns to refer to the Holy Spirit. In Hebrew and in Aramaic, the word for “Spirit” is of the feminine gender. I typically use female pronouns when referring to the Spirit (and masculine pronouns to refer to Jesus, and no pronouns to refer to God the Creator) in an attempt to be biblically accurate. I hope that this language choice does not obscure for you the crux of this message.

comes from outside our own souls, the voice deep within us that tells us what is right when we alone as humans have no business knowing what is right. That is a soft voice, a very-hard-to-understand-and-even-hard-to-hear voice.

The other way we talk about the Holy Spirit is this story from Pentecost, a violent wind surging through us and making it abundantly clear that a divine presence is among us. It is a loud gust, a mighty wind that compels us, forces us, to admit that we humans are not alone in the world. This understanding of the Spirit is the polar opposite from a soft nudge tugging at us. She is still mysterious but cannot be ignored or overlooked. We do not sense this Spirit quietly but instead are blown over by her.

When we think about the Spirit this way—the way we do on Pentecost—we can use words that describe her force, but perhaps a better focal point is her abundance. When the Spirit tugs at our soul, she is miniscule; when the Spirit blows us over, she is massive. There is an overabundance of the Spirit in the story from Acts 2, an overflowing outpouring of God’s advocate for humanity present in the room.

This is what Peter says in the verses following, quoting the prophet Joel: “God says, ‘I will *pour out* my Spirit on *all* people’.”² Sometimes—most of the time—we encounter God in small moments...but occasionally, we are overwhelmed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, overwhelmed to a point beyond saturation.

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The gospel reading this morning is the story of the wedding at Cana, the first miracle of Jesus where he turns water into wine. Of all of Jesus’ miracles, this is the one that feels the least benevolent. The main result of this miracle isn’t that the hungry are fed, the lame can walk, or the sinful are forgiven. It is that the party can go on and the guests can keep drinking. As a result, sometimes the value of this miracle is a little harder to see.

That’s a shame, because this miracle mirrors the Pentecost story in Acts, an overabundance of the presence of God that impresses a crowded roomful of folks who are gathered.

There are a number of surface parallels. The wedding scene takes place at Cana in Galilee; Galileans are the first group mentioned in the list of people in Acts. Mary is a critical player in the Cana wedding, and she is also named in Acts 1, just before the Pentecost story.³ In both scenes, she is identified as, “Mary, the mother of Jesus,” the only two places in our Bible that label is used.⁴ Both are stories that help launch their respective books. But there are deeper parallels that actively fuel our comprehension of each story.

Understanding the parallels between the wedding at Cana and the Pentecost story insists upon an understanding of the role wine played in Jesus’ culture. For us, wine has become somewhat demonized, a symbol of debauchery and sin. And while drunkenness was certainly castigated in biblical times, wine itself was not. One scholar I read said that “The Torah [itself] was frequently called ‘wine’ in view of its effects on” humanity—that is, because the scripture had such a transformative and profound impact on the Israelites’ view of the world, immersing

² Acts 2:17, emphasis mine.

³ Acts 1:14

⁴ Joseph A. Grassi. “The Wedding at Cana (John II 1-111): A Pentecostal Meditation?” *Novum Testamentum* 14, no. 2 (1972): 133. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1560179>.

themselves in it was about like having a drink of wine.⁵ At the very least, wine was celebrated as a sign of covenant and sacrifice, an expression of trust and of joyful blessings offered to humanity by God. It was a celebration of life.⁶ As a result, it is a central part of Jesus' first miracle and a central part of his Last Supper, both of which we highlight today.

It's a little strange for me, a teetotaler who hasn't had a glass of wine in his entire life, to view wine this way (unless, of course, we're talking about Cheerwine). But our Bible does present wine more as a blessing than a curse, as a gift from God to be appreciated.

Because wine was viewed in this light, as a celebration of God's blessings and of life itself, the creation of wine from water in John 2 is not just a magic trick that allows the party to go on. It is an indication that Jesus has come to offer new life, life where there was none, life that will come even when we expect that life has been used up. It is a precursor to his final and greatest miracle, a sign that he will rise up and live again.

But the miracle of wine from water is not only about Jesus' triumph over death; it is also about ours. When Jesus tells the servants to fill up the stone jars with water, the scripture is specific that these jars are "filled to the brim." The emphasis here is that the jars were filled to completion, even to an overflowing capacity.⁷ This is a story about Jesus providing life abundantly, to the point where it is poured out over all.

That sense of completion and abundance is where this story really foreshadows the Pentecost story. In Acts, "it is the outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh...an overflowing gift that goes out."⁸ In both stories, there is an emphasis on God offering the overabundant gift of new life to all.

As a result, both of these stories are covenant stories. The setting of the John passage in a wedding establishes it as a covenant story. Mary takes that covenantal emphasis a step further when she says, "Do whatever he tells you." Those words echoed Yahweh's instructions to the Israelites to heed God's word, establishing the Mosaic covenant. They are also words that come from the feast of Weeks...which is what the disciples were celebrating when the wind descended upon them and launched our first Pentecost.⁹ Likewise, the arrival of the Spirit in Acts is not just a fancy trick but rather the establishing of a new covenant. The presence of the Spirit obliges the disciples—and, still today, obliges us—to commit, to refuse to ignore, to enter into a relationship with God that we know as covenant.

And in both stories, this is a mysterious and confounding thing. In John, we are told that the steward is baffled at the arrival of this new wine—the best wine, he says. In Acts, the scripture reads "All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'" In both stories, the presence of God is confusing.

We no longer walk side by side with Jesus, but we do live in a world where the Spirit remains present. And when she approaches us, whether softly or in a rush, we are often still confused, unsure, and unprepared...like the steward in John and the disciples in Acts, we do not believe that this gift of new life, this presence of God among us, could actually be happening.

⁵ Grassi 134.

⁶ "Wine in the Bible: Symbolism and Uses in Scripture." *Woman of Noble Character*. Retrieved 2022-06-02. <https://www.womanofnoblecharacter.com/wine-in-the-bible/>

⁷ Grassi 135.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Grassi 134.

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A summer or so after my student found herself overwhelmed by the Spirit, she and I and the rest of her peers sat in a circle and talked about our own faith experiences. Most of the youth said that they'd never really felt an outpouring, an overabundance of God's presence that was like a violent, inexplicable, impossible-to-ignore wind. Moreover, they said they were suspicious of those who claimed experiences like these, echoing the doubters in the 2nd Chapter of Acts who sneered and suggested the room was full of drunks. One of them said, "I don't know that, now at least, anyone really has an experience where God hits them in such a big or unreal way."

My student, God bless her, spoke up and said, "well, I have." She then shared her story...and while some in the room may have taken her at her word, many still seemed to doubt her veracity.

When the discussion ended, she and I found ourselves alone walking across the campus from our meeting room to the bunk rooms, and I told her, very quietly, "Never let anyone tell you that your encounters with the Holy Spirit weren't real."

No one else can tell us when we feel the Holy Spirit tug at our hearts, and no one else can tell us when we have been overwhelmed by the Spirit. That is up for each of us as individuals to determine alone with God. The longer we spend normalizing the miracles of our scripture, the older and more jaded we get, the harder it becomes to hear when the Spirit nudges or especially to trust when the Spirit overwhelms...but this overwhelming does happen. According to the gospel of John and the story in Acts we read today, it happens abundantly, overflowing, potentially to anyone, in any place in life.

Today, we celebrate the bread and the cup of the Last Supper, and we celebrate the presence of the Holy Spirit in our world. There is incredible mystery in both the ritual of communion and the idea of the Spirit...but both reflect a powerful mystery, a mystery we cannot ignore, a mystery that is as real as our very God is. Just as we remember the sacrifice of Christ, we also remember the authenticity of the Spirit.