

The Spirit's Breath

Pentecost ~ Acts 2:1-21

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The Day of Pentecost—fifty days after the Passover- the disciples and believers are gathered in Jerusalem as Jesus instructed. They were waiting. Waiting for the story, which seemed to them to have taken a long, long pause, to continue. And then the play button was suddenly pushed and the action began at breathtaking speed. Rushing wind, divided tongues of fire descending. A loud outburst of language coming from every direction. And power. Clear, undisguised power of God.

Hundreds of years before God sent Jesus, the prophet Joel, a 9th century prophet, had told the Hebrew people that the Spirit would descend in a radically new, inclusive way. And the Hebrew people waited. For nine hundred plus years they waited. And waited. God's Spirit had been present before—but just to a chosen few, here and there. Moses on the Mountaintop. Ezekiel in the desert, Elijah in a cave. Peter, James and John on a mountain with Jesus.

But not until this day of Pentecost, described in our scripture this morning, had God's spirit descended with such power, such might, such clear and obvious presence that all who saw it were startled and amazed. Never before had God's Spirit been present in such an all-encompassing way with God's people. Anyone, it seemed, could claim God's spirit. It didn't matter what town they were from what language they spoke, how well they prayed, when they had last been in worship. The tongues of fire swept into that room and rested on all of them, but also on each of them, individually and specifically. We all have that same accessibility, that same availability, that same attainability to the Holy Spirit.

Unfortunately, I think the church—at least the mainline United Methodist Church, has struggled to claim the presence of the Holy Spirit in our life together, and in the individual lives of believers. The Rev. Dr. Elaine Heath is the Dean of the Divinity School at Duke University. She is also the co-founder of the Missional Wisdom Foundation, a non-profit that is helping established churches, and new churches, claim their mission in new and innovative ways in our world today. Elaine believes that our distance from the Holy Spirit, and the wisdom of the mystics and saints who were close to her, has caused us to fail to listen attentively and openly to where the Spirit is leading us.

Elaine lifts up the examples of Paul, whose conversion was a powerful example of receiving the Holy Spirit, Mary, whose obedience to the Spirit allowed her to carry the Christ Child, and John Wesley, whose attentiveness to the Spirit sent him out of the walls of the church and into communities, prisons, and hospitals with the Good News of the Gospel. Despite these rich examples of God's Spirit speaking, Elaine writes that

leaders in the North American mainline church often scoff at the idea that God speaks directly to folks today. People often cite resistance to that notion by relating

an anecdote about a person who started a cult or committed a crime because allegedly, ‘God told them to do it.’¹

Unfortunately, this overarching understanding among mainline churches like ours has squelched our ability to experience the Holy Spirit. We are fearful of emotions and expression in our worship. We don’t let anyone know if we have a mystical experience or a dream where God speaks to us. And, if we assume that the Spirit never speaks, Dr. Heath says, “we demote prayer to a monologue with talkative humans beseeching a silent and unresponsive God.”²

I count myself among those of you, and those faith communities, struggling with this. As many of you know, I have had a spiritual director since 1998. A spiritual director is a trained individual who helps us explore our spiritual journeys and be attentive to where the Holy Spirit is moving in our lives. When one meets with a spiritual director, there are three chairs in the room—one for the director, one for the directee, and one for God. I worked with a wonderful director from 1998 until 2016. For the last year I have been working with a new director, who has been inviting me to tune in even more deeply to the Holy Spirit in my own life, through attentiveness to my breath, thinking about how my dreams might be nudging’s of the Spirit, and more. This has been a journey that has stretched and challenged me—but also opened me. If you are interested in personal spiritual direction—and I highly encourage it-- Joy Crawford, of our staff, is a spiritual director, and can meet with you to tell you more about it, and also recommend other directors you might see.

I share this piece of my journey so that you know that I know the challenges of attentiveness to the Holy Spirit. That’s important because on this Pentecost day, I want to challenge us as a church. I believe it is time for us to listen deeply to where the Spirit is leading us. We are in a time when we must discern how God is leading us forward. We are in a time where we must, in the words of Dr. Heath, trust “God’s authority to lead [us] in new directions, beyond [our] inherited traditions.”³

These new directions will not emerge overnight. They will emerge through a thoughtful process of discernment and exploration. We have already seen them emerging through our partnership with the Coptic congregation and the rich relationships we are building there. Welborne’s leaders are exploring new ways of connecting with other groups in our community who follow Jesus, but do not want to have anything to do with church as they have known it in their lives.

So, part of these new directions of the Spirit are about us, as a congregation, discerning our path. Equally important is each one of us growing in our own connection

¹ Heath, Elaine; *God Unbound: Wisdom from Galatians for the Anxious Church*; Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2016; p 31.

² *Ibid*, p. 32.

³ *Ibid* p. 36.

with the Holy Spirit, each of us becoming alive in the Spirit. Howard Thurman, a 20th century mystic, writes these words to us:

Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive. ⁴

What the world needs is people who have come alive in God's Spirit. People who have come alive through feeding people who are hungry, or people who have come alive through helping a new resident of the US learn how to get a Driver's License. The world needs people who have come alive in the Spirit by having the courage to hold engaging discussions about justice and mercy, and managing to love one another in the midst of the brokenness that is our civil discourse. The world needs people who have come alive by orchestrating reconciliation and peace rather than vengeance and war. We need people who have come alive in the Spirit by engaging silence, to listen to the voice of God as it stirs in our hearts.

The world needs people who have come alive in the power of the Holy Spirit. We can be those people. My next step is a 5 day retreat later this summer, at which Dr. Elaine Heath will be one of the leaders. I invite you to join me in your own personal journey of tapping in to God's Spirit, and those will be as unique as we all are from one another. If you would like to make an appointment by phone, in person, by email with me or with Joy Crawford in the next months to talk about a simple next step for you, I want to invite you to take out your Smartphone and text me before the end of worship, or find a yellow prayer request card in the pew racks and write on that your desire to grow in your connection with the Holy Spirit.

I also invite you to hold Welborne's leaders in your prayers, as together we discern as a faith community where the Holy Spirit's breath is leading us. This fall and winter we begin preparing for a new strategic planning process, which will be a primary means of that discernment, and will involve the whole congregation. The fundamental prayer is that we might listen, and that we might cast aside our fear to hear where God is leading us, and have the courage to follow.

The Spirit's Breath is among us. It is within us. It has the power to speak to us and to direct us. May we become Pentecost people filled with the Spirit's breath. Amen.

⁴ Lifted up by Kate Huey in her commentary on this text, www.worshipways.ucc.org, 2010.