

Come, Holy Spirit

Acts 2:1-21

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When I was pregnant with Caroline, and waiting for her to make her debut, I used to sing that verse from the opening hymn again and again: “Spirit of God, bright wind, breath that bids life begin, blow as you always do, create us anew.” I thought maybe if the Spirit blew through me enough, my little girl would be ushered into the world. The song didn’t really work to make her come on time (she was 9 days late), but it did remind me day after day of the newness of life that is available to all of us when we allow the Spirit into our lives.

Today is Pentecost, the fiftieth day after Easter, the day when we celebrate the birth of the church. On this day, the disciples and others were gathered in an upper room – thinking, praying, talking, discerning, hiding out – and the Spirit came through that place mightily, descending on each head like tongues of fire. Like Moses’ burning bush all over again – burning but not consuming, raging but not injuring, calling attention to the presence of God. And like Moses, they weren’t the best and the brightest, these folks – they were ordinary men and women: timid, terrified, untrained. And the Spirit blew into their space, their room – maybe a lot like this one – and *everything* was made new.

It gave them a power they could not have imagined: they all started speaking in languages that were foreign to them. There were large crowds in Jerusalem for the Jewish festival of Shavuot, the day when the Jews celebrate the giving of the ten commandments on Mt. Sinai. There were people there from all over the world: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Lybia belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs. And *all* of them heard these timid, untrained, fire-headed disciples speaking their own languages.

Can you imagine? It caused such a ruckus that the crowds came to see what was going on – all these disciples were speaking with eyes full of shock and amazement – they didn’t even know the words that were coming out of their mouths, and yet others understood. It was so crazy that some thought the disciples were drunk in the middle of the morning. But the wind swept in there and filled them up not with wine, but with the power of God - so that they were overflowing with the life-giving story of God’s grace. They could not stop talking about Jesus to these crowds from all over the world. The Spirit gave them the power to preach and be understood, to perform wonders, signs, and miracles. And the world was never the same.

Can you imagine? What if the Spirit swept through *here* in that way, landing on each of us – the timid, the scared, the untrained – like tongues of fire, and suddenly not only could we speak in words we did not know we had, but we couldn’t stop speaking. Have you ever been so excited about something that you could not contain yourself – you couldn’t stop telling people about it? Children do this quite often, proclaiming to total strangers that they are going to Disneyland or they scored a goal in their soccer match or they’re having a birthday. Children have fewer inhibitions – they are not as self-conscious as we are. When we are excited, we think we’re supposed to hold back, to act like it’s no big deal. But have you ever been so filled with something that you couldn’t help but spill it out? Imagine if what was filling you was the

Holy Spirit, and what spilled over was the most life-giving words ever spoken. Can you imagine?

The thing is, we usually read this story from Acts and we celebrate the birth of the church and we honor those disciples and their *very interesting* experience and we just go on with our lives as usual. But that is a shame. Because this story isn't just to make us sing Happy Birthday to the church – that is beside the point. This story is to remind us of the power of the Holy Spirit which sweeps through this place with the same awe-inspiring potential that the disciples experienced. It's to remind us that we are heirs of that experience, and God is waiting to bring something new to life in each of us, as well.

I was reminded this week that there is a finite amount of air in the atmosphere. Air is not created anywhere – we breathe in and out, and the trees breathe in and out again and again, without a cosmic generator pumping new air into our world. And this means that we are breathing the same air, you and I, that the disciples breathed. In and out. And you and I are breathing the same air right now, too – in and out. We share it. We share a little piece of the disciples, and the church fathers and mothers, and our ancestors, and our children. And in each breath, there is Spirit. With each breath, you take some of God into you and release some of God back into the air, with a little bit of you attached. This is the Spirit, longing to fill you up in mighty ways so that you are overflowing with the life-giving good news of God's salvation.¹

We, the present-day church, don't wait for something new to be generated from the atmosphere – what we need is already present. So instead, we wait for the same Spirit that moved the disciples to move us. That Spirit is still here, still moving – but the question is, do we believe in a God who works in untrained, timid, half-hearted, overcommitted, scared people like us? Do we believe in a God who will descend on us like fire and usher in a whole new creation in front of our eyes? A God who can fill us up so that we're overflowing with life-giving words of grace? A God who will sweep through and transform even us – then help us to transform the world?

If we believe, then we have an opportunity today. You see, the Spirit is polite. It doesn't push itself on anyone. It comes when invited, but it does not bully people. It will not invade your body, but it will fill you up if you ask. So we have an opportunity, if we believe that our God still has such power, to invite that Spirit to come here, now, to bring something new to life in our very midst, to transform us and our community to look more and more like the kingdom of God, to give us words we did not know we had to tell others about the love that has changed us. We have that opportunity, and all we have to say is, "Holy Spirit, Come."

Now if you are not willing to change, if you are not interested in transformation, do not say the words. Because this story from Acts shows us that when the Holy Spirit shows up, things happen – and you might not like that if you are already happy with the way things are. But if you are dissatisfied with the state of the world, the state of your church, or the state of your own soul, pray that simple prayer: "Come, Holy Spirit." And watch as tongues of fire appear on heads all around you, and God breathes new life into our very midst.

Come, Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Reference Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Gospel of the Holy Spirit," *Home By Another Way* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1999), 143. Much of today's sermon is inspired by the cited sermon from Taylor's collection.