

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs – in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power."

All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?"

But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: *'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'*"

## **WILL WE SPEAK?**

Last week as we left the disciples they were looking up to heaven – watching as Jesus was gathered into the clouds – wondering what it would all mean – longing to fathom the mystery of heaven and to understand Jesus' promise to come close in a new and radical way. Since then they have returned to Jerusalem – entered the city and retreated to the upstairs room where they are staying. They have devoted themselves to prayer – made peace with the betrayal of Judas – calling it the realization of scripture and his allotted share in the ministry. They have arrived at decisions about witnessing to the resurrection of Jesus – calling on God for direction in their ministry. It has been a time of waiting and transition that ends now in wind and fire – turmoil and confusion – prophecy and fulfillment. Today the Easter promise of the Holy Spirit comes!

This is the formation of the church and it happens with all the drama that accompanies any birth. It is miraculous and inscrutable – there is a strangeness about how the church came into being and how these once timid disciples found their tongues to proclaim the truth of Christ. They are waiting and praying when all heaven breaks loose – cracks open – erupts sound and emotion like the very currents of air that swept across the waters at creation and made something out of nothing – the breath of God is once again bringing something to life.

The same Spirit that moved over the face of the deep to bring order out of chaos in creation brings resurrection and gives birth – life to the church. There are no boundaries limiting the activity or effectiveness of this Spirit: it transcends boundaries of religions and race; language and learning; rank and status; gender and age.

First the disciples heard it, then they saw it – fiery tongues of flame – representing the Holy Spirit – becoming the gift of *other tongues* – speech. The gift of proclamation has finally come to the tongue-tied followers of Jesus.

This is one of the most exciting scenes in the Bible. It is the moment of truth – Jesus is dead, risen, and ascended – at the right hand of God. The disciples have been taught, prodded, encouraged, entrusted with the good news. They have experienced the roaring entry of the Holy Spirit – driving wind and scorching flame – will they carry it on? Will they be filled with new wisdom and prompted to express themselves? Can they stand up in the face of opposition and accusations? Will they allow their timidity to be transformed by an infusion of divine enthusiasm? Can they become people who live by the Spirit? Will they speak?

And if they speak, who will listen? We are told that there are people from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem – involved in this cataclysmic event. A crowd has gathered. They are bewildered because each person hears the disciples speaking in their own language. The Holy Spirit has connected the people linguistically so that they can be joined in faith – joined in the salvation of Jesus Christ. The listeners are amazed and astonished – confused and suspicious. The in-breaking of the Spirit is profoundly unsettling and deeply threatening to the congregation.

As they devise an explanation – some rationalization for such irrationality – we are reminded of a similar experience near the beginning of Luke's Gospel when Jesus visits his hometown synagogue. The community's admiration turns to wrath when they are reminded of how the powerful love of God has irrupted into the lives of foreigners – available to everyone. Once again the power of God comes suddenly into an ordinary assembly of the faithful in a most extraordinary way – convention is disrupted by the divine. Once again everything hinges on the Spirit's ability to set proclamation in motion – evoking questions, bewilderment and scorn.

In response to their questions Peter stands to speak – Peter who *followed at a distance* – who said, "*I do not know him*" – who wept in the courtyard in despair at his own betrayal. Peter – a disciple tested and found wanting – a disciple we can relate to, perhaps the disciple we are – Peter stands to speak.

In Genesis the Spirit of God breathed life into dust and created a human creature. In our scripture today from The Book of Acts the Spirit has breathed life into a once cowardly disciple and created a new person who has the gift of bold speech. Peter quotes from the prophet Joel about how God's spirit is poured out on all flesh – sons, daughters, young, old, slave and free. Where do we get the idea that God only speaks through some people, whom we deem acceptable? This is a miracle of proclamation – those who had no *tongue* – no voice – to speak the *mighty works of God*, now preach – share what they know to be true – openly and with confidence.

***Spiritus – ruach – pneuma*** – all mean *breath* or *wind* at their most basic linguistic level. This implies that *spirit* is an invisible phenomenon – no one can see the wind, only its effects. It can also imply that *spirit* may at times be a rather fleeting thing. After all, the refrain of the book of Ecclesiastes is that much of life seems like no more than a *breath* – a transient, vapory blip that disappears in an instant. However, we know that both wind and breath are not only invisible and sometimes fleeting but also awesome realities. The *breath of life* provided by someone giving CPR literally is the difference between life and death. And certainly we are aware of the fact that wind can be hugely destructive – consider the cyclone that lashed Myanmar just over a week ago killing, leaving people homeless, destroying power and cutting off safe water supplies. You don't need to be able to see the wind or know where it comes from to respect its reality and its power.

Despite all we know *spirit* can be elusive. Frederick Buechner notes that the word gets drained of meaning through over-use. We hear about *school spirit*, the *spirit of '76*, *team spirit*, the *Christmas spirit*. The adjective *spiritual* has not fared much better. This word has been plastered all over the place in the last twenty years to the point where it can define everything from genuinely pious Christian faith all the way over to those who talk about the *Zen of economics*. Supposedly *spiritual people* may be those who attend church every week or those who never go to church but who use their Jeep Grand Cherokee to zip up to the edge of a cliff on weekends so they can meditate on the unity of sky, rock, and soul.

Buechner also observes that we cannot deny that for all its vapory, insubstantial features, the *spirit* of something can be strong and contagious. It is remarkably easy for even a very calm and quiet person to get whipped up into enthusiasm by the *spirit* of a political rally, a football game, or even a lynch mob. When the big statue of Saddam Hussein was toppled some years ago, you could see the *spirit* of enthusiasm wash over the crowd in Baghdad. You could no more see that spirit than you can see a person's breath, but you knew it was there – just as a similar spiritual contagion later whipped up into a frenzy crowds of looters in the same city. *Spirit* is real but it can function equally well to inspire positive, helpful behavior and negative, hurtful behaviour.

Today is Pentecost, the day the Holy Spirit of God comes upon the church in power. Celtic Christians chose the wild goose as a symbol representing the Holy Spirit. A wild goose is one noisy, bothersome bird. It is an image of the Holy Spirit that jars us out of

our complacency – moves us beyond predictable patterns of comfortable behaviour. The Holy Spirit is the creative breath of God that fills our hearts like each intake of breath fills our lungs. If we did not have the Holy Spirit, the church would be dead – we would be dead. You know that if we take the oxygen out of a room anyone in that room will soon die. Take the Holy Spirit out of the church, and the church will die.

The coming of the Holy Spirit didn't just happen to Peter. It didn't just happen to the disciples. The coming of the Spirit is not some exotic phenomenon that is hidden and of purely personal significance. This outpouring of the Spirit is wild – sometimes noisy and bothersome – there is wind and fire – loud talk – buzzing confusion – public debate. The Spirit is all about the church *going public* with its good news – attracting a crowd – encouraging people to stare and wonder. This new breath of air is set loose on the earth – provoking a storm of wrath and confusion for some – clearing a way of hope and empowerment for others.

It is the moment of truth – Jesus is dead, risen, and ascended – at the right hand of God. We have been taught, prodded, encouraged, entrusted with the good news. We are part of a community of faith that participates in the ongoing experience of the Holy Spirit – driving wind and scorching flame – will we carry it on? Will we be filled with new wisdom and prompted to express ourselves? Can we stand up in the face of opposition and accusations? Will we allow our timidity to be transformed by an infusion of divine enthusiasm? Can we become people who live by the Spirit? Will we speak?

Everyone who calls on God's name will be saved! **Amen.**

This Sermon Copy reflects the style of the spoken word rather than the written word. Allowances should be made for grammatical style and sentence structure that are characteristic of the spoken word. The Rev. L. T. Kavanagh, 2008