

“Catching the Spirit”

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Acts 1:6-14 + Numbers 11:24-30

Mason First Presbyterian Church

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Pentecost

Today is, of course, the day of Pentecost, that special day in the church year that comes around faithfully seven weeks after Easter. The word “Pentecost” originally comes from a Greek word which simply means “fiftieth,” referring – for us Christians – to the fiftieth day after Easter. If you call Easter day #1 and just start counting, then yesterday would have been day #49, and today would be day #50. But the festival of Pentecost actually pre-dates Easter by a long time; it was originally a Jewish festival long before it was a Christian one. So when you read in Acts 2 the words “when the day of Pentecost had come,” it’s talking about the Jewish festival of Pentecost, which was originally a festival celebrating the wheat harvest in the spring. It was one of three great Jewish pilgrimage festivals; Jews would come to Jerusalem from all around the Roman world to celebrate. In the Old Testament it was called “the Feast of Weeks,” because it was celebrated exactly seven weeks after Passover. Pentecost is still celebrated by Jews today; nowadays they refer to it by the Hebrew name *Shavuot*, which simply means “Weeks.” Christians celebrate Pentecost not because of the spring wheat harvest, but because of what happened at one particular festival of Pentecost, seven weeks after Jesus’s death and resurrection.

The story is familiar to most of you, but let me just repeat a few key points. The followers of Jesus are now completely bereft of their leader. After his resurrection, Jesus had spent some time with them over a period of 40 days. Ten days before Pentecost, his followers watched him ascend into heaven. Over the next ten days, the followers of Jesus – who numbered only about 120 people in total – were trying to figure out how to carry on without him. They appointed a disciple named Matthias to replace Judas Iscariot, so there were once again twelve apostles (Acts 1:15-26). Jesus had instructed them “not to leave Jerusalem but to wait there for the promise of the Father” (Acts 1:4) and had said to them “you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (Acts 1:5). They were “constantly devoting themselves to prayer” (Acts 1:14), but they were also *waiting* for *something* to happen.

The festival of Pentecost arrives; Jerusalem is bursting at the seams with Jewish visitors from all over the known world, and the followers of Jesus are celebrating privately on their own. They don’t quite fit in with their Jewish brethren any longer. Luke tells us “they were all together in one place;” there’s a long tradition that says they were actually in the same “upper room” where they had celebrated the Last Supper with Jesus, seven weeks earlier. Luke describes the event like this: “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 remember, they are *indoors* when this happens. But all the Jews who were on the city streets *around* this building could hear the commotion going on inside. At that time, Aramaic and Greek were the most commonly spoken languages in that part of the Roman Empire, but at the Pentecost festival, there were lots of people in Jerusalem who had traveled a long ways and who had grown up speaking other languages, their own native languages that they had learned in their hometowns. Suddenly, the followers of Jesus in that upper room were speaking in other languages, other *real* languages, languages that the people out there on the streets *recognized*. They are bewildered: “How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?” The followers of Jesus come out and talk with the people around the building, and Peter gives a great big speech, the most famous sermon in the history of the church, in which he explains that what is happening is the fulfillment of prophecy, and that God has made Jesus both Lord and Messiah. Many of the crowd are persuaded by Peter’s words and the miraculous event that they themselves had witnessed and experienced, and three thousand Jews become Christians on that day. Three thousand! The Church of Jesus Christ just multiplied by a factor of 25!

This was not the first time that the Holy Spirit had manifested its power. The Holy Spirit shows up a number of times in the pages of the Old Testament. One of those is the story we heard earlier from the book of Numbers. This takes place some twelve centuries before Jesus, after the Israelites have left Egypt and crossed the Red Sea, after they have received the Ten Commandments and other laws at Mount Sinai, but before they have arrived in the Promised Land, during their 40-year sojourn in the wilderness. During that period of time they were worshiping God using a portable temple they had constructed, called the “tabernacle,” which is described in detail in the book of Exodus. This is a rendering of what it might have looked like; there was a central structure called the “tent of meeting” which contained the holy shrine, and in front there was a large altar, which is where the priests offered the sacrifices. Here’s another representation, a full-scale model that was constructed at a park in Israel, although it was built with materials different than what the Bible mentions. Still, you get the idea. Something like this was used by the Israelites as their temple for many decades. In the story, Moses gathers together 70 elders of the people of Israel in the tabernacle, around the tent of meeting. The Lord comes down in a cloud, speaks to Moses, and “took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders, and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied.” That spirit is what we would call the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit rested upon those 70 elders, just as the Holy Spirit rested upon the disciples of Jesus on the day of Pentecost, twelve centuries later. The elders of Israel were given the ability to utter prophetic oracles, just as the disciples of Jesus were given the ability to speak in other languages. In both cases, the Holy Spirit gave people gifts they did not previously have.

There’s an interesting twist in this story. There were two men, two Israelite elders, who had not gone to the tabernacle, but remained in the camp where the Israelites slept. Their names were Eldad and Medad. For some reason they didn’t join the 70 elders at the tent of meeting. But “the spirit rested on them” too, and they started uttering prophetic oracles in the camp. This doesn’t sit well with everybody. Someone runs to tell Moses. Joshua, who was Moses’s assistant, tells Moses to stop them. Joshua would have made a good Presbyterian; he wanted things done “decently and in order,” and what was happening was definitely not – in his opinion – decent or in order! But Moses discerns that this is an authentic manifestation of the Holy Spirit. He chastises Joshua, then exclaims, “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!” In other words – *let the Spirit blow where it will*. If it’s God’s will that those two men prophesy, then so be it!

So that's just one out of a number of stories in the Old Testament where the Holy Spirit shows up. It had been active in human affairs periodically before Jesus arrived on the scene. And, of course, it has continued to be active since that important day of Pentecost. It doesn't just give people the ability to utter prophetic oracles, like it did to those Israelite elders, nor does it just give people the ability to speak in other languages, like it did to those early Christians in Jerusalem. It does a whole lot more.

Some of you are aware that I serve on our presbytery's Commission on Preparation for Ministry, which is a group of pastors and elders who mentor, nurture, and oversee seminary students in our denomination who are going through a long process to become ordained as ministers of Word and Sacrament – people who are on their way to becoming pastors, chaplains, and the like. I have particular responsibility for one student, a young woman from the Presbyterian Church of Okemos named Joanna Townley. Joanna has completed two years of graduate study at Vanderbilt University Divinity School in Nashville, and she has just written a series of six essays about her sense of call, her understanding of what it means to be Presbyterian, her understanding of the responsibilities of teaching elders, and so forth. Those essays were just read and reviewed by the Okemos Presbyterian Church's Session last Wednesday night, and by myself and the other committee member who is shepherding her through this process. Joanna had quite a bit to say about the Holy Spirit, and she said it *very* well. I asked her if I could share some of it with you, and she graciously agreed. In her statement of faith, Joanna says, "I believe in the Holy Spirit, to whom we listen and attune, who nudges and points us to live out God's call upon our lives, present in the triune God from the very beginning. The Spirit who imbues all things with life, who filled the valley of dry bones in the presence of the prophet Ezekiel, who Jesus promised would come after his death, and who lighted upon the apostles at Pentecost, still moves within our lives today." This isn't just a theological doctrine or an academic exercise for Joanna; she has felt the Holy Spirit move in her life, guiding her as she has made some important decisions and calling her to ordained ministry. "How can we know?" she asks. "How can we be aware of our encounters with Spirit? Prayer, meditation, sacrament, and even the reading and interpretation of scripture can be practices of discerning the presence of Spirit. Through the quiet contemplation of a tree, or a sunset, we can be opened to the manifestation of God in creation.... Faith, worship, prayer, and meditation are not places that we go to escape; they are places that support our work in the world. By discerning the nudges of the Spirit, we are reminded of truth and moved to action." Joanna describes some of her own experiences, and then says: "We can encounter Spirit through doing the work of God in community. In Jesus' baptism, the Spirit empowers and accompanies Jesus, Creator blesses Jesus, and Jesus carries out the work of the kingdom through fellowship with humankind. Jesus enters community. He fights injustice. He heals the sick. He lifts up the losers. Through Jesus' ministry, all persons of the trinity work with one another to build a new reality in the world.... Ultimately, as we discern Spirit, we see how God is calling us into fellowship with one another to carry out the work of God in the world. It is the work of justice and liberation."

I'm not sure I could have said it any better. The Holy Spirit is alive and active, still moving in our world today, still calling people to step out of the ordinary and into the extraordinary – people like Joanna, and many, *many* others, not just seminary students, but *anybody* who is open the possibility that the Spirit might be moving in their life, *anybody* who is attentively listening to the subtle (or sometimes not-so-subtle) ways the Spirit moves, *anybody* who is willing to let their life be *changed* by our holy God. That *anybody* might be *you*. What if it is? How is the Holy Spirit moving in *your* life?

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