

St. John's Episcopal Church
Jackson, Wyoming
Sermon for the Feast of Pentecost ~ May 24, 2015
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The Feast of Pentecost celebrates the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church in fulfillment of the promise Jesus made to his disciples: "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you" (John 14:26).

Who is the Holy Spirit? The scriptures do not really define who the Spirit is except in terms of what he does. While we sometimes use metaphor and simile to speak of the Holy Spirit, these are really weak and mechanical terms compared to the personalistic terms in which the Spirit is best described. The Holy Spirit is a divine being, not a thing. And, this Spirit is never identical with the human spirit: rather, he works from the outside, with us, but Other than us.

Christian teaching has often neglected the Holy Spirit, leading to misunderstanding. For example, some have identified the Spirit with the individual conscience. The Holy Spirit has been identified with the human mind, denying the freedom to choose or resist God's will. Some believe the Holy Spirit is manifested primarily in unusual behavior such as speaking in tongues, loud noises, gestures, and dancing. The Holy Spirit seems to take possession of the individual and control one's actions.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the word *ruah*, meaning "breath," is often used to speak of the Spirit of God. Writers referred to the nearness of God, involved in nature as well as the life-giving, reforming source of strength, involved with the entire nation of Israel, and in the messages of the prophets.

The New Testament emphasis on the Holy Spirit takes a slightly different turn. The Holy Spirit is still taken to be God present with us, but in the Christian Testament he points to Jesus Christ after God has acted mightily in him to bring about redemption for all. The Greek word *pneuma* can mean "breath or wind" but also means "will or soul." We have the record of Jesus' teaching on the Holy Spirit, the experience of Pentecost, and St. Paul's teaching to guide us to an understanding.

So, what does the Holy Spirit do for us today? There was once a mother who, as she put her child to bed each night, would tell him some of the exciting stories of the Old Testament: Joseph and his brothers, Moses and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, Daniel in the lion's den, Jonah and the big fish. One evening, when she was telling him the story of David and Goliath, the child interrupted with a question, "But Mom, what is God doing now?"

That's a question you and I might well ask, especially in the wake of the heartbreaking loss that has brought grief to this community. Sometimes in despair and frustration, we cry out, even as Jesus cried out from the cross those words of Psalm 22, "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

This morning, I invite you to consider how the message of Pentecost speaks to our need to know that God has not abandoned us and that we are not alone in an impersonal, uncaring universe.

In those god-forsaken moments in our lives, the Spirit of God bears witness with our human spirits that we are children of God and heirs with Christ of God's amazing grace (Romans 8:15-17). When we speak of God as Holy Spirit, we are expressing the heart's need to know that God is still with us, sustaining our faith, drawing us together in worship, and empowering us in God's mission.

When we are broken hearted, frightened, and weak, “the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (Romans 8:26, 27).

When we have lost hope, and we know that without hope we cannot face the future, the Holy Spirit restores our hope. “For in hope we were saved” (Romans 8:24).

When we are confused, the Holy Spirit enlightens us and helps us make sense of things. Jesus told his perplexed disciples, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13).

When we have difficulty in worshiping Christ, the Holy Spirit leads us in praise. According to St. Paul, no one can say, “Christ is Lord” except through the influence of the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 12:3). The Holy Spirit enables us to magnify Christ as the ruler of our lives. Together as one worldwide, age-long family we gather around the banquet table and its host. With all the company of heaven we sing songs of praise and thanksgiving. All this we do at the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

When we want to withdraw, the Holy Spirit helps moves us out of ourselves back into community with others and in those relationships we find comfort. In today’s gospel reading, we find Jesus preparing his disciples for what lies ahead in his passion, crucifixion, and resurrection. I wonder if he is anticipating how they would withdraw behind closed doors. I wonder if he is trying to let them know that the Holy Spirit will come to unite them in mission and empower them to move out into the world that needs the good news entrusted to them. And I wonder if he is not mindful that withdrawal is a normal response to shock, so he promises that the Spirit will come to restore life in community.

When we want to hang on for dear life to whatever is left, the Holy Spirit restores generosity to our lives. Hurt, disappointment, and grief can become a logjam in our emotions and our behavior toward others if we let it. When the Holy Spirit is at work in us, those painful emotions are transformed into a greater ability to empathize with others and to be generous with our time, our abilities, our service, our treasures, and our witness. As the Spirit moves us to let things flow out of us toward others, more good things flow in. For we discover that all generosity toward God and our neighbor is the result of God’s extravagant generosity toward us. Freely have we received and so freely we give.

There is much more that could be said about the work of the Holy Spirit as the active and living presence and power of God at work in the world today. But perhaps it is important today, in this grieving community, to be reminded of these manifestations of the Holy Spirit so that we might recognize him at work among us in this particular time of need. And so we pray,

Come down, O love divine, seek Thou this soul of mine,
And visit it with Thine own ardor glowing.
O Comforter, draw near, within my heart appear,
And kindle it, Thy holy flame bestowing.

And so the yearning strong, with which the soul will long,
Shall far outpass the power of human telling;
For none can guess its grace, till he become the place
Wherein the Holy Spirit makes His dwelling. Amen.