

“Come, Holy Spirit”
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, VA
Pentecost – May 31, 2009
Acts 2:1-21

“O Holy Spirit, by whose breath, life rises vibrant out of death; come to create, renew, inspire; come, kindle in our hearts your fire.” Amen.

Happy Pentecost! Today is one of the great feasts in our community, one of the few that hasn't been taken over by the secular world. If I walked over to Farm Fresh today and started saying Happy Pentecost to people, I bet most of them would look at me as if I were speaking in a foreign language. I can say Merry Christmas or Happy Easter, and even non-Christians would know what I meant, though they might prefer me not to say it. But Happy Pentecost? Even in the church we're not sure what to do with it. Some of us wear red, representing the flames of fire that accompanied the Spirit's coming upon the disciples. Some churches have red balloons or streamers, and some have cake because Pentecost is often thought of as the birthday of the church. Some churches have a dramatic reading of the Acts passage with people speaking it in different languages. But none of those things seem to truly capture the spirit of the Holy Spirit.

Maybe we're just not sure how to talk about the Spirit. I hear people say things like, “I really felt the Spirit moving in that meeting.” Or “The Holy Spirit was definitely there in the room.” Or “Couldn't you feel the presence of the Holy Spirit when we were talking?” I'm never quite sure what they mean. Not that they don't know what they're talking about, but I'm just not sure how they know when the Holy Spirit is present.

Even in my theology class in seminary we rarely talked about the Holy Spirit. On the last day of class we played “stump the theologian,” in which we were supposed to bring in questions that hadn’t been answered over the course of the quarter. My question was “Why didn’t we talk about the Holy Spirit?” We had talked for weeks about the doctrine of God, spent a good chunk of time on Jesus, and mentioned the Spirit briefly when talking about the Trinity. We had covered the nature of humanity and sin, and spent some time on the church. But I noticed a big gap. I started to be amused. Why don’t Episcopalians talk about the Holy Spirit?

Maybe one of the reasons we don’t talk as much about the third person of the trinity is because the Holy Spirit resists our control and refuses to be tamed. What do we learn about the Spirit from our reading? “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.” What if that were to happen right here, right now? The rush of a violent wind, swirling through our church, ripping bulletins out of our hands and blowing them around, deafening us with its roar, gusting through our careful hairstyles and tugging at our clothing. And then, as if that weren’t enough, what if we looked around and saw a flame of fire on each of us? What if wasn’t a little tiny fire dancing on our foreheads but was a huge tongue of flame, blazing with fiery power? How would you feel if everyone around you started speaking in a different language?

I don't know about all of you, but I would find it pretty scary. Instead of thinking that the Holy Spirit was present, I might start thinking, "Who we gonna call? Ghostbusters!" In some of our hymns we sing, "Come, Holy Spirit, come." But if this is what it's like for the Holy Spirit to come, I'm thinking stay, Holy Spirit, stay. If the Holy Spirit fills me, then I might no longer be in control. I might be inspired to do things that I'm not sure I want to do. I might have to realize that I'm not the one who has power over my life, God is. How terrifying is that? How wonderful is that?

What should be our response to the Holy Spirit filling this room? The Acts passage gives us some options. The disciples were all there in a community, together in one place, and had been constantly devoting themselves to prayer. Jesus had told them the Holy Spirit would be baptizing them shortly, and they were ready, open, available to the presence of the Spirit. Their response was to receive the Spirit, to allow themselves to be filled with the wind and the flame and the gifts that the Spirit brought, and then they shared those gifts with others.

The crowds outside in Jerusalem had different responses. Many of those in the crowd experienced something of a minor miracle. Here they were, people from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, Rome, and many other places, and they each heard the disciples speaking about God's deeds of power in their native language. If any of you have ever been to a foreign country, to a place where you don't speak the language, then you know what a relief it is to encounter someone who speaks English. These people experienced the Holy Spirit in a

comforting, hospitable way, as they heard more about God in their own language.

Some of the people were cynical. There are always cynics, skeptics, those who would disparage and mock, and it was no different then than it is now. They accused the disciples of being drunk, and indeed it might have looked that way to those who did not know what was going on. Others were amazed or confused. I bet a few were afraid.

And then Peter, Peter who had gotten so many things wrong when Jesus was alive, Peter who had been the one to deny Jesus, Peter who was now filled with the Holy Spirit, began to preach. Peter was one who had known the taste of ashes and death as he denied Jesus and then saw his Lord being crucified. He knew what failure felt like when he chose to walk his own path instead of the path of Jesus. But he also experienced the grace of the resurrection and the joy of the risen Christ. And on that day of Pentecost, he received the Holy Spirit and blazed forth to proclaim the Word of God. His response this time was not to run away in fear or to hide in denial but to accept the power of the Holy Spirit and to proclaim it to all whom he met. He gave up his life of fear, his need to be in control, and let God work through him.

So what is our response? Because, friends, the Holy Spirit does come here, maybe not in a violent rush of wind or in tongues of flame. Maybe it sometimes feels like there is less room for the Spirit in our beautiful but controlled and structured liturgy than there is in the more exuberant practices of some of our Christian brothers and sisters in other denominations.

But the Holy Spirit does come here to create, renew, and inspire.

The Holy Spirit does come here to breathe new life out of death.

The Holy Spirit does come here to wrest our fears and need for control away from us and to fill us with gifts of grace and love.

The Holy Spirit does come here.

How will we respond?

Will we ridicule and mock or will we share the Spirit's gifts?

Will we continue to believe we are the ones in control, or will we open ourselves to the power of the Spirit?

Will we choose to hide in fear or denial? Or will we choose to invite the Spirit in with a welcoming cry,

Come, Holy Spirit, Come

Kindle our hearts with your fire!