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May 24, 2015

“Holy Spirit Holes”

Excerpts from Acts 2

It’s Pentecost! Today is the day! It’s the birthday of the church – the celebration of the gift of God’s Spirit to us – and the beginning of excitement about what God is doing in and among us.

The story of the first Pentecost is found in the 2nd chapter of Acts. It’s a story filled with rich symbolic language, a kind of ancient version of special effects. George Lucas and James Cameron don’t have anything on the Bible. The Spirit of God came upon the community with the sound of a “rushing wind” and with “tongues of fire” resting on each of them.

Then, we are told, the followers of Jesus, who were “filled with the Holy Spirit”, began to speak in “other tongues”, and all present heard the praise of God in their own language.

I know, I know. We Christians who like to call ourselves “progressive” and who like to use our heads as well as our hearts to express our faith, find this story just a little distasteful. It’s just too emotionally charged; not intellectual; and frankly, a bit too Baptist and Pentecostal to us. But today, on the day of Pentecost, I’m going to ask you to suspend your previous ideas about this story and hear it as a spiritual story about what happens when God’s Spirit comes to us:

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.

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, "

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.*

Excerpts from Acts 2

Obviously, Pentecost had a terrific impact upon the fledging church, but what does it mean for us today? Pentecost remains a day to dream about the church – our church – and how it will become what it is supposed to be:

- A community of grace and service
- A lively place with a strong progressive witness
- A dynamic missional outreach program, including our hygiene pantry
- A church where things are happening!

Scholar Diana Eck, in her 1993 book *Encountering God*, revealed some surprising details about medieval church life. She discovered that Pentecost was one of the most creatively celebrated days on the church's calendar. In 10th century Rome, for example, the church knew how to throw a party – especially its own birthday party – on Pentecost. In order to make the coming of the Spirit of God a dramatic, dynamic event for their congregations, leaders of Pentecost services involved architecture, not just anthems.

The custom of painting heavenly scenes on the great domed and vaulted ceilings of cathedrals served not only to inspire the devout with blessed visions. It also disguised discreet trap doors. These small openings were drilled through the cathedral ceiling to the rooftop.

During the Pentecost worship service, some hapless servants would be drafted to clamber up on the roof. At the appropriate moment during the liturgy, they would release live doves through these holes. From out of the painted skies and clouds on the cathedral ceiling, swooping, diving symbols of a vitally present Holy Spirit would descend upon the people below. At the same moment, the choirboys – like beat boxers - would break into the whooshing and drumming sound of a holy windstorm. Finally, as the doves were flying and the winds were rushing, the ceiling holes would once again be utilized – as bushels upon bushels of rose petals were showered down upon the congregation. These red, flickering bits of flowers symbolized tongues of flame fall upon all who waited below in faith.

They called these opening to the sky in medieval churches “Holy Spirit holes”. Did you get that? Holy Spirit holes. In Diana Eck’s words: “We need these Holy Spirit holes. Our churches need these skyward opening to the wind rush of God... Holy Spirit holes would be perpetual reminds that our knowledge of God is not complete. They would ceaselessly remind us that no image or icon, no petal or flame can domesticate God’s Spirit. Its symbolic images – like the dove and the wildfire - are images of utter freedom.”

Jurgen Moltmann coined the description of the Holy Spirit as “shy member of the Trinity” because we mainline Protestants don’t always acknowledge that the Spirit of God has any power in our lives. I think this is a travesty and may be part of the decline in mainline churches today.

One of the reasons I love Pentecost so much is that it signifies wild freedom and intoxicating joy. The Holy Spirit is always confounding our expectations, slipping out of our restrictive ideas, and opening new doors for the people of God.

The imagery of fire represents the outpouring of the presence of sacred being and of creative power. Fire transforms, destroys, purifies, enlightens, inspires, and protects.

Sharron R. Blezard writes, some might say we're playing with fire when we're talking about the Spirit, and that we're messing with a wind mighty enough to huff and puff and blow the whole house down. Yep, we may feel all snug and secure in our houses of worship, cozy in our rituals and traditions and history, but the Spirit of God refuses to be confined or conformed. The Holy Spirit comes not only to comfort and guide us, but also to liberate and goad us.

And so it is Pentecost once again. People of God get ready: The Holy Spirit is at work doing a new thing,

- * re-forming us as church,
- * reigniting our passion and fire for the gospel, and
- * giving us a new language that speaks to this age, our time, and our contexts.

All we have to do is let go of the dry bones that hold us back and confine us to dusty glory of some former decade. All we have to do is be willing to risk everything and dream dreams, see visions, and speak prophetic words of hope, grace, and love that fly in the face of the status quo.

Paul writes that we, along with all of creation, have been pregnant with possibility, with this hope-full promise of Spirit life so amazing that even our prayers are spoken by the Advocate when we cannot find the words to name our deepest needs and pain. This is powerful stuff. We have been blessed with the gift of the Holy Spirit, a gift that keeps on giving and living and speaking truth. And yes, sometimes the truth is hard to hear, harder to tell, and harder still to live. But this is our calling as God's beloved and as followers of Jesus.

Yes, it is Pentecost once again, and this time we stand on the brink of what scholar and author Phyllis Tickle calls "the Great Emergence." It seems that every 500 years or so, the Holy Spirit comes in and cleans house, dismantling structures

that have become tired and crumbling, upsetting the church's patterns and expectations, and digging out entrenched configurations and institutions. We can rest assured that God is always up to something new and fresh, and when we feel these Holy Spirit movements, we had better get on board for the ride because God's work and reconciliation of creation will happen with or in spite of us.

I imagine those first disciples were wholly unsettled by the events of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. I'm sure they puzzled over his teachings, his prayer for them, and his seemingly cryptic instructions about this Advocate who was coming. Perhaps they felt ill-prepared for the task at hand. Maybe they feared that their security in the law and their temple/synagogue practice and tradition would unravel. Being on the margins must have been terrifying, but still they kept on hoping and trusting imperfectly. And then it was Pentecost with tongues of fire, rushing winds, words aplenty, and the power of all that had been prophesied unfolding around them. How truly amazing that must have been! What energy must have sparked their faith and practice! We know what happened next, and it was truly amazing.

This week perhaps it's time to explore the possibility that we're standing on the verge of our own Pentecost experience – personally or as a congregation - that truly God is doing a new thing in our world. In another decade the mainline church as we know it will probably look significantly different. That's frightening, especially for those of us who don't do change well. What we must remember is that we are not alone. Jesus has sent the Advocate, and this Holy Spirit will guide us into truth. This is our promise. This is our abundant hope. So, indeed, come Holy Spirit, come! Let the Holy Spirit holes open up and let the wind blow and send the doves of peace to fly among us. Come Holy Spirit, renew and refresh; blaze and refine; motivate and send us out!

Resource Used:

Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Bananas" by Diana L. Eck