

“The Spirit of Life”  
May 19, 2024

Ezekiel 37;1-6  
Acts 2:1-21

A new member joins us.

Beloved staff depart.

Children sing a new song.

And all of us worship God on this beautiful morning.

It is a joy-filled time in our life together as a congregation.

And then confusion swoops in.

At least that’s how I often feel when the scripture lessons are read on Pentecost.

We hear about the Spirit of God—coming to restore life, coming to the followers of Jesus. What’s happening seems remote, disconnected from our lives today.

It’s often hard to get a grip on that “third person” of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. Maybe that’s just the Spirit’s very nature. The Spirit, Jesus said, “blows where it will”—eluding our control, our understanding, our comprehension.

That makes a lot of people feel awkward, especially us Congregationalists, because, generally, *we* like being in charge; we like to know what we’re dealing with. But when we speak of the Holy Spirit—well, what *are* we dealing with—or what’s dealing with *us*?

Let me begin with some possibilities—and it might take a few minutes for all of this to come into a clear focus, so please bear with me in my own confusion and uncertainty.

We can start with our own lives, for it might be said that *all* people are the recipients and bearers of the Spirit of God.

The creative force of the Spirit of God that Genesis says brooded over the waters of chaos is made real in each of us, enabling us to navigate our ways through the often unsteady waves of life.

Those difficult times that you came through? The Spirit made it possible for you to prevail.

Those difficult times you are going through right now? The Spirit is with you in them.

The Spirit helps us as we grow not only in knowledge but also in the wisdom that is needed so that we may prosper and thrive

Good decisions, good choices? The Spirit of Wisdom at work in you.

The Spirit is the Counselor, the Advocate, reminding us of God's forgiveness that allows us to continue after we have done our worst.

The Spirit also empowers us to bring the forgiveness of God to the world in these polarized and unforgiving times.

The Spirit breathes life into our own often dead spirits, making dry bones lives, bringing us out of our dying ways. The Spirit is a part of the new creation that God began in the risen Christ.

The Spirit of God is called the *Holy Spirit* because it makes us *alive*, not because it is separated from life. The Spirit sets this life of ours in the presence of the living God and in the great river of eternal love. There is a connection between our experience of God and our experience of life.

So the theologian Jürgen Moltman suggests that, instead of speaking of the "Holy Spirit" it might help to ask: "When were you last conscious of the 'spirit of life?'"<sup>1</sup> We can answer that question out of our own everyday experiences. We will talk of times of being consoled in grief, occasions when we have been encouraged as we went through difficult circumstances, moments when we have felt a deep and abiding joy. We recall the love of life which delights us. And the power of the spirit is the living power which this love of life awakens in us.

This same Spirit is given to us, not simply as individuals but as a group—as a congregation, as the followers of the risen Christ gathered together—that we might continue the teaching and the work of Jesus: announcing the love of God for all people, indeed for all creation, and doing those things that make that love visible and tangible in our time, in this place.

When we speak of the Spirit of Life, then, the Spirit poured out at Pentecost is the Spirit we know still today.

With this in mind, as we reflect on the scripture lessons we heard this morning, remember that years in the wilderness shaped the life of the Hebrew people. They thought of God using the analogy of the fierce desert wind. In the desert the wind would arise suddenly, prove incapable of being bound, possess enormous power, and then disappear.

This wind was called the *ruach*, the word we translate both as "spirit" and as "breath." The Hebrew people understood the *ruach* as nothing less than the breath of God. The holy is the living compared with the dead, and what is moving compared with the things that are petrified and rigid: dry bones, hardened hearts.

When the early Christians—raised and nurtured as Jewish people—told of their experience during the Jewish feast of Pentecost, they turned to those wilderness images, those desert memories: "Suddenly there came from the sky what sounded like a strong, driving wind, a noise which filled the whole house where they were sitting . . . They were all filled with the Holy Spirit."

Can you sense the feeling of being seized and possessed by something overwhelmingly powerful? Dry bones come to life, hardened hearts are softened.

This power is behind the quality of surprise in the Christian life. Again and again, we find ourselves doing things that astonish us. The Spirit leads us in directions we wouldn't dare take on our own.

Now, here's the good thing about the Spirit of God whom we encounter in the scripture lessons we heard today, the good thing about the confusing and confounding Spirit of God: When there is confusion and bewilderment, the Spirit is present. Or maybe we could say when the Spirit is present there is confusion and bewilderment.

In Jerusalem, on Pentecost, the crowd hears the followers of Jesus speaking in many different languages by the power of the Holy Spirit. They were "amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'"

This was neither the first nor the last time, but on Pentecost the Spirit seems to bring confusion, doubt, and uncertainty.

So it is that the late Krister Stendahl suggested that we should invoke the Spirit when we are uncertain, when we do not know, when we are facing new situations.<sup>2</sup> This, I would add, means that we should be invoking the Spirit quite a lot in these days. There is so much that we don't know. In a time like our own, when new situations seem to present themselves every day, when old answers—even last year's answers—have stopped making sense, it is important to cultivate an awareness that *just at this time* God's Spirit is at work in us and among us. There is a power here that works in us and through us that is beyond us as well.

The presence of the Spirit is perplexing as much as it is comforting. The Spirit comes when we *don't* know what to say, when we are at a loss for the right words. When the forces around us are silencing and accusing us, the Spirit comes to give voice and to advocate for God's new creation.

God's Spirit blows in what might be called an "Easterly" direction, away from death and decay, away from the confines of regrets over the past, missed opportunities in the present. The Spirit of God moves toward resurrection.

We can't control God's Spirit, but occasionally, as with the wind, we can feel the presence of the Spirit in our lives, in this congregation:

A new member joins us.

Staff depart.

Children sing a new song.

And all of us worship God on this beautiful morning.

It is a joy-filled time in our life together as a congregation

And if we are open to the presence of the Spirit of Life, the presence of God's Spirit for us today, we will find faith—not certainty, but faith—as we face the new situations that life brings to us.

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<sup>1</sup> See Jurgen Moltman, *The Spirit of Life*, esp. pgs. x and 278ff.

<sup>2</sup> Krister Stendahl, *Energy for Life*, pg. 43, 44.