

*In wind and fire, in water and word, in music and silence, in bread and wine – Holy Spirit, come to us. Amen.*

It must have been a terrifying time for the people who had followed Jesus throughout his ministry. In many cases, these people had left everything behind – family, livelihood, worldly possessions – in order to follow this itinerant preacher and miracle-worker. The women and men who supported Jesus were convinced that he was the Messiah that the prophets of the Hebrew Bible promised would be coming to deliver them.

Things had been going well – Jesus was gaining more followers, challenging the authorities, and inspiring countless people.

While he wasn't bringing the military power that the people expected, he at least offered an alternative way of living among an oppressive regime, so his followers continued to have hope in his ability to change the world.

And then Jesus was arrested, beaten, given an unfair trial, and executed. The disciples were shocked and didn't know what to do.

And then Jesus was raised from the dead, which was even more shocking!

When Jesus came back from the dead, things were different. He was less present and less predictable. He appeared in places and ways his followers did not expect. And he told them that he wasn't back to stay.

Instead, Jesus promised to send someone else – a comforter, or an advocate, to be with his followers in his impending absence.

Then Jesus was taken up into heaven. Last week we heard about Jesus' ascension. It was amazing and awe-inspiring.

And for the people who had put everything on the line for Jesus, it was also, probably, terrifying.

What were they supposed to do now? How could they return to their previous lives, with all that they had been through with Jesus? They were stuck simply *waiting* for what God would do next, with no hint at a timeline for action.

After the ascension, the women and men who had been following Jesus were all gathered together in one place. It was 50 days after the Passover, after Jesus had been put to death. So much had happened since then, but they were waiting, because they didn't know what was coming next.

And then.

Suddenly.

A wind like a freight train whipped through the place they were gathered. Flames of fire rested on each one of them. And they found themselves speaking in every language known to humankind!

The Holy Spirit came to the followers of Jesus, in the wind and in the fire.

This is the opposite of what Elijah experienced on the mountaintop – he was hiding from persecution and waiting for God to speak. A great wind came, then an earthquake, then fire – but God was not in the wind or in the earthquake, and God was not in the flames.

[\[1 Kings 19:11-13\]](#)

Elijah found God in the sound of sheer silence.

That was *not* what the disciples of Jesus needed on the day of Pentecost.

These disheartened people needed a powerful, overwhelming, unmistakable experience of the presence of God!

And they got it.

They were filled with the Holy Spirit. Just like a balloon is filled when we share the breath that gives us life with the deflated, inanimate object, so the Holy Spirit shared life-giving breath with the disciples.

As an aside, let me note that the words used in Scripture for wind, breath, and spirit are interchangeable. The Holy Spirit is the breath of God, and the wind that hovered over the waters at creation.

The Spirit is the source of our life – of our breath. So on Pentecost, the disciples were enlivened by the Holy Spirit, as balloons are inflated with our breath.

But just like one of those special balloons that can be made into a balloon animal, as we saw during the children's sermon, the end game isn't just to be filled. The Spirit came to the followers of Jesus to invigorate and enliven them, not for their own sake, but for a greater purpose!

These special balloons can be turned in to animals, with a few skillful twists and a little creativity.

The followers of Jesus were turned in to leaders – the ones who had been listening were now the preachers! They were filled and empowered with everything they needed to make a difference in the world.

God gave the disciples the ability to speak in the native language of everyone who was in Jerusalem that day.

And foreign language students the world over are filled with jealousy!

All that these women and men had to do was open their mouths to speak, and they could be instantly understood by people from completely different cultures and ethnicities.

The wind, the fire, the talking in multiple languages – all of this caused such a ruckus that it drew a crowd.

This diverse, international, interracial crowd didn't know what to do with the disciples. *How* were they speaking in different languages? Maybe they were drunk or something.

But Peter heard the doubters. And knowing that they were mostly all Jews, even though they were from various countries, Peter appealed to an authority they would understand – Scripture.

“We’re not drunk!” he called out. “We’re fulfilling a prophecy!”

And he quoted the passage from Joel that says that old people and young, free people and slaves, women and men, will all be empowered to proclaim the Word of the Lord!

And proclaim it they did.

Since the very earliest days of the church, there have been Christians in Syria, Ethiopia, and the Holy Land.

Within a couple of years, missionaries had traveled the entire Mediterranean region, starting churches and spreading the good news about Jesus. From there, the Word spread to places further north in Europe, eventually carried by the very empire that had initially persecuted the followers of Jesus.

According to tradition, Thomas – that faithful disciple who has borne the unfortunate descriptor of “doubting” for 2000 years – was the most adventurous of all, bringing Christianity all the way to India, where he remained until his death.

The followers of Jesus were filled, inspired, and invigorated by the Holy Spirit! But they didn't just sit back and wallow in it – they got out of their comfort zones to do something about it!

The result is that, today, we can experience God through countless cultures, languages, ethnicities, and traditions. The Spirit speaks to us through African music and Indian artwork, through European traditions and Middle Eastern children. There are no limits to the presence of God's Spirit.

No single group can claim proprietary ownership of it.

Pentecost forbids the ethnicizing or racializing of Christianity.

When the first followers of Jesus were given their advocate, they were also given the tools that they needed to get outside of themselves, to abandon their comfort zone, and to spread the Gospel to the world.

That is still our calling today.

Get outside of ourselves, abandon our comfort zones, and spread the Gospel to the world!

Though our calling is a bit more complicated than the disciples' was.

In those first days of Christianity, it was a pretty reasonable guess that the story of Jesus would be new news to anyone you encountered.

We cannot make that assumption now.

When we get ourselves out of our own comfort zones, we also have to be prepared to meet God in new and exciting and sometimes uncomfortable ways.

I have heard from Christians who live in Israel or Palestine that European missionaries would show up to their hometowns and try to convert them. Upon finding that they were already Christian, the surprised missionaries would say, "oh! How long have you been Christian?"

Really? In the country that Jesus called home? There have been Christians there for 2000 years.

Following the example of the disciples now requires an awful lot of humility.

We can experience the exhilaration of being filled by the Spirit, and we can answer God's call to unashamedly proclaim the Gospel to anyone who will listen, and to proclaim it so enthusiastically that someone might accuse us of being drunk, or high, or crazy, or otherwise unreliable.

And in the midst of all that, we must be prepared for the Gospel to be proclaimed *back* to us, from unexpected places, by people who we thought were our enemies, and in ways that we do not expect.

God doesn't fit in a nice and tidy box. God supersedes all boundaries. The Spirit can and does show up in our lives as fire or wind, or the sound of sheer silence.

To me, the take-home message of Pentecost Sunday is that the Holy Spirit is alive and well, and that God continues to speak to us in surprising ways, including – perhaps *especially* – through people and cultures that are different from us.

A Canadian or Egyptian who only finds God speaking to them in their own language and through their most familiar worship style is probably failing to listen to the calling of the Spirit. God is *in* those cultures, to be sure, but God is not *exclusively* in those cultures.

An American who only finds God at work in American culture and industry and citizenry is failing to recognize the movement of the Spirit among Syrians, Mexicans, Russians, Native Americans, and countless others.

God is with us.

But God is not with *only* us.

This is why, on Pentecost Sunday, we learned a song in a language that is not the mother tongue of anyone in this room.

God is present just as much among the people of South Africa and Zimbabwe who speak Xhosa as God is present among us.

And watch out. In coming weeks and months, we may also learn songs in Spanish or Swahili, or other languages. Embodying diversity in our common worship is one way to honor the presence of God among diverse people. So we will continue to build bridges between cultures so that we can gain as vast an experience and as deep an understanding of God as possible.

The greater appreciation we have of people from all walks of life, the closer we will come to experiencing the Spirit as it was poured out on Pentecost.

And that is the true prize – being filled with the Spirit. Because God promises that all flesh, regardless of race or ethnicity, economic or social status, health, gender, age, or education level – *all* people will experience the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.