Devotional on Pentecost Sunday During the Covid-19 Pandemic

What does the Holy Spirit mean to you? I’ve been asking that question of different people this week and certainly I’ve been getting different answers all of which have merit, all of which are powerful, I think.

I’ve gotten everything from the Holy Spirit is the abstract side of God to the gut feelings we can get about something we should do but that don’t seem to have much basis in logic. Somebody said Shekinah (the glory of God that overwhelmed the temple at several moments in the Jewish Scriptures); someone referred to the “breath upon the deep,” in Genesis one and two people referred back to Genesis 2 when the Lord God “breathed into Adam and he became a living being.” One of you named “Holy Wisdom,” “Sophia” in Greek, the “Lady Wisdom” that creates the feminine side of the couple, the other being “The Word,” “Logos” in Greek which we associate with Christ from John’s Gospel.

It seems many of you have given thought to this because, for you, the Holy Spirit is “the active presence of God” both in the world and in your lives. Several of you said that the Holy Spirit recreates you in the mess of life and brings you peace and comfort when no other concept of the divine will do.

There’s a beauty in asking this question because the Holy Spirit so clearly eludes our discursive reasoning capacity. Scripture itself is full of “spirit” metaphors water, wind, and fire, what the ancients of almost every religion and philosophy we know of called the elemental forces or substances of the earth. Indeed the very word “spirit” can refer to God’s Spirit or Life, our breath or breathing or the wind that blows over creation, unseen, mysterious as to its source and its effect.

When we say “Holy Spirit” we are referring to the Mystery of God’s presence in and through all things, but as Christians we are doing so in a way that also draws into that referent what we’ve been celebrating the whole of the Easter season.

Today, on Pentecost Sunday, we have a very short gospel reading, probably the shortest of the entire 3 year cycle that both in its profound claims but also ambiguous claims draws out that connection and, at the same time, draws us further into the mystery and connects us to the Holy Spirit in a highly personal and communal way.

When Jesus, quoting Scripture, says that rivers of living water will flow out of the hearts of those who believe in him, he presents us with a conundrum; this because there is no passage of scripture that says what he says!

Rather, what Jesus seems to be pointing to is the wide variety of texts and images that refer to the Spirit, including the four great rivers that flow out of the original garden of Eden in the creation myth; to Isaiah 55 where God offers us the invitation to come and drink and be fully satisfied; he’s also evoking the great river that flows out of the renewed temple in Ezekiel, a river that will make even the Dead sea fresh, the saltiest lake in the world!

Jesus takes this wide-ranging image of renewing, life-giving water and gives it several twists. By saying “as the scriptures says,” although there’s no direct quote he or we can point to; and, by doing it where he does it, the temple; and, thirdly, by focusing on the source of this outpouring, himself and the believers’ hearts he radically shifts our focus.

Surely, we would rightly think, human beings, even the Messiah, are simply the product of, not the originators of the elemental life forces, or, in this case, *the* elemental life force, *the* spirit of life, of renewal and quenching!

It’s as if Jesus takes all the witness of the scripture and it’s various powerful metaphors and personalizes them.

To stick with the imagery of water and rivers for a moment, perhaps you’ve been to a place where a mighty or even medium-sized river narrows into a gorge; a place where the water is channeled through a narrow opening. At those places, the power of the water is evident in a way that it isn’t when it’s meandering across a plain. The volume of the water doesn’t change but of course the force and speed of it must in order to get it all through the narrower opening. Think of Hell’s gate or other places.

We imagine that the Spirit in nature, in Creation, is the most phenomenal thing; and it is so utterly awe inspiring, yes! The forces of nature, the wind sweeping across the trees, the stars, the mountains, the animals of the great deep, and, yes, the mighty rivers of the world!

But here we have the Messiah claiming that he is the great Ur source of water, the quenching, fulfilling source and that everyone who drinks him will become the location, the secondary source of the rivers of life, the four great rivers that emerged out of Eden, the river that flowed out of the temple. Here we have the great promise of New Creation. Each of us a cosmic churning channel of life giving energy, the love that grows all things good and beautiful!

Now, what the crucified, resurrected, ascended Jesus does is to bring all of human experience, all human suffering and potential into relationship with the Spirit that pulses underneath and in all things, animate and inanimate. By drawing all of humanity into God, Christ is able to draw all of divinity into humanity, to make us the New Creation, the New Temple, the Body of Christ/God.

Not a static building but like the original creation, receptive, active. That’s the advantage of the image of Rivers of Living water emerging from our hearts: it’s dynamic, it’s emergent.

And this, finally is what Pentecost is about. We are given the privilege of “believing,” which is not simply “referring to” or “recognizing” the Spirit; astoundingly, we are given the privilege of inviting or evoking the Spirit, that which only God evokes!

Sometimes this means that we are assured that all will be well, not simply as “positive thinking or speaking,” but deep in the well that is our soul. I asked my youngest, who’s doing his Ph.D. in Philosophy “What does the Holy Spirit mean to you?” and he said, something so profound, “to me Spirit means returning to what is already there but knowing that it’s there in a new way.”

There’s the personal note; the connection between the Spirit in all things and now channeling into and through us in a way that brings everything, all people closer, closer to each other in love and service.

Sometimes when we say “come Spirit” what results is not quiet but the wild, untameable energy of the gorge; we experience a dramatic transformation that shapes us, the gorge, after all is the shape it is because of the water passing through. I think of people who discover sobriety after a lifetime of alcoholism. When this sort of transformation it has downstream effects, the power of testimony ripples into others lives. Transformation spurs new life in otherwise arid fields.

In our texts today, prophecy was one of the results of the Spirit. Prophecy, at its essence, is not foretelling the future, but telling the truth about what God wants to do and will do: God will love a love-denying world so much that many of us will begin to believe in love again, will begin to serve God’s world again, whether taking our share of leadership, like Eldad and Medad in our first reading, a surprising development in a world that didn’t believe in diverse and diffused leadership, or in the case of Acts, telling about the mighty acts of God in different languages, that is, sharing God in ways that those around us can understand, sharing it in “their lingo.”

Someone this week said this, “Also, when you wake up and there’s this tune in your head, but you don’t quite identify it, and then gradually the words to a song come out of the fog that is your brain, and you realize it’s the assurance or guidance or answer that you needed…. Often, to the prayer/question that you went to bed with.” That, my friends, is the essence of prophecy, the truth, but also the truth *we need now*. And doesn’t our confused world need this!

Recently I was part of a golf tournament in which we were raising money for someone who has come to be known as a chaplain to the unchurched, someone who speaks the language of the secular world and finds there a ready welcome for the message of Christ.

To refer back to my midweek update, just as John Wesley was able to speak to the working poor of the newly formed industrialized cities of middle England, just as a few of you can speak into your Dutch heritage or your evangelical heritage, or your charismatic or pagan heritage.

Someone said, the challenge becomes remembering that we’ve evoked the Spirit and then trusting in the Spirit’s movement in our lives and in our lives with others.

There was an old movie called “A River Runs Through it.” At Pentecost we celebrate that a river runs through *you!* Through you, rivers of living water, giving you the power to speak the truth of God, to serve in the love of Christ, to stretch into what would normally be just beyond your power.

Come Holy Spirit, Come!