

Spirit
June 4, 2017
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Acts 2:1-18

Luke tells the Pentecost story this way, more or less.

Everything in the upper room is quiet and calm. Jesus' friends wait in thick silence. They sit on stools and lean against doorposts and look at the floor. Even when Peter prays, he prays slowly, measuring his words, pausing between sentences to listen, like a child listening for mom and dad to come home.

Quite a contrast to the hubbub below. Outside streets, normally home to about 30,000 residents, are choked with as many as 200,000 people in Jerusalem for the Pentecost holiday weekend. Wise men hobble about on camels. Visitors shout in Syriac, Egyptian, and Latin. Vendors yell out prices, priests pray aloud in fancy robes on street corners, and shepherds from Bethlehem laugh to remember an old legend their fathers told them.

Upstairs, though, the shutters are drawn and the noise is muffled. Everyone is quiet, tense, waiting. There are just about a hundred ordinary people in the upper room, the kind of regular folks who normally fill our pews every Sunday.

Then, in the middle of one of Simon Peter's prayerful pauses the Spirit breaks loose. Deafening, thundering sound like Niagara Falls, a rush of hot wind, and Peter stops praying. He smiles and his hair stands on end. Crackling streaks of flame pop and dance everywhere. The Spirit enters each and all, and immediately one hundred newly minted preachers rush for the door and tramp down the stairs, and into the streets. Now it is the Egyptians and Syrians who watch in stunned silence and listen. Peter and the rest of Jesus' friends are preaching good news in their own languages. It is Pentecost Sunday.

I can remember reading this passage as a child and wishing with all my heart for a new Pentecost like that first one. As a child, I wanted to see fires burning but not hurting the heads on which they danced. But I have never had that experience.

This irritates me. A lot.

I've said similar things to you before. Unlike Christians in some other traditions, I do not feel my faith—not as a personal relationship with Jesus, not as voices whispering to me in dreams or visions suggesting I should change jobs or buy a new car, not even as a comforting, quieting presence that calms me. I get that last thing by sitting on the porch with Irene and a glass of wine.

Mind you, I am not unfeeling. I have intense emotions about many things, but the pleasures of an intimate relation with God isn't one of them. You see, faith is, for me, a personal commitment to follow Jesus because I admire his ethic. Faith, for me, is my halting attempt to be like Jesus. And faith, for me, is an exciting intellectual commitment to the near-universal human belief in God. But

faith has never been, for me, anything like that first Pentecost coming of the Spirit, an unmistakable contact with God like that described in today's scripture.

And that irritates me. A faith built on the experience of tongues of fire would be so much easier, I think—for all of us. It would be very convincing to hear someone speak in tongues—like Dutch, or Shona, even though the speaker didn't know that language. It would be very convincing, I'm sure, to have God speak to me personally in a way that I couldn't mistake—maybe, like in the gospels, have the Spirit show up as a dove, here over the pulpit, and then hear God speak to all of us at once, saying, "Jesus is my son, who I love." But we have not seen such doves, or heard the thunder, or seen the fire, even if our sung prayer in today's hymns suggests that we have.

And yet, I believe in the Spirit. I cannot, perhaps, tell you what exactly the Spirit is, whether the Spirit is God, a member of the divine Trinity, made of eternal indivisible, essence shared with Father and Son, as the Athanasian Creed suggests, or whether the Spirit is merely a divine servant or thought or whisper.

But I believe in the Spirit, whatever exactly Spirit is, *because I believe*. What I mean is this, in three brief vignettes.

You see, the Spirit is like gravity. We all know that gravity is, though none of us can say what it looks like or sounds like, or even if it does either. This week there was a story in the Science Journals about gravity waves caused by the collision of two black holes. Scientists in Louisiana and Connecticut, using the combined power of their two laser interferometers, detected the gravity waves predicted by Albert Einstein. Still, in spite of producing squiggles on the computer screen, you can't bottle those gravity waves. You can't frame them or sail them. Still, we know that gravity is there, whether or not it is a wave. That's how it is with faith, too. Something keeps me spiritually grounded even though I can't bottle it or frame it. Jesus says, "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going."

The Spirit is like gravity, and it is like a path in the woods that an acquaintance of mine once told me about. Jack had a house, in Michigan, near a lakeside forest. In the forest there was a narrow path hemmed in on low bramble bushes and undergrowth.

Jack's neighbour told him that if you walked that path in the early morning, you could sometimes see deer going up to the lake for watering. So every morning Jack got up and walked that path, looking for the deer. He did it for a month, then a year, but never once did he see the deer. Still, the path had become a part of Jack's life, and so he continued to walk it because it was his habit.

Then, one morning, when he least expected it, on the hardest part of the path, Jack actually saw a doe and her fawn sipping water out of a little creek leading to the lake. One morning, walking that path, after he had stopped looking for them, the deer appeared. For me, the Spirit is the path that eventually, and surprisingly, brings me before the mysterious gifts I experience in this church: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Spirit is like gravity. And Spirit is like path through the woods that leads to surprising but wonderful spiritual gifts. But Spirit also reminds me of the Greek muses. According to one version of the myth, Zeus, the great god of the Greek pantheon, slept with Mnemosne, the God of memory because Zeus wanted nine daughters who would inspire the arts, literature, and science among the gods and humans. The first muse born of this match, for example, named Calliope, was the muse for epic poetry, and so this muse inspired Homer to write the *Odyssey* and *The Iliad*.

Now, when a script writer or painter or sculptor is inspired to create something beautiful and new, we say that their muse is inspiring them. Well, the Spirit is my faith muse.

The Spirit is how God—not insisting, not compelling, not commanding, not coercing—the Spirit muse is how God nevertheless gently inspires me both to believe and whispers that I really can do to others as I would have them do to me, when practically speaking I am on the brink of saying I won't believe and can't love my neighbour. The Spirit is my faith muse. The Spirit, says Peter in today's passage, inspires us all, old and young, men and women to dream dreams for making this world a newer and better place.

The Spirit, like gravity, grounds me. The Spirit, like a path through the woods, leads me, surprisingly sometimes, to great gifts. The Spirit, like a muse, whispers to me, so that I may choose to believe.

But altogether, what I mean to say is this. Even though I have a hard time with faith, even though I have never experienced the ecstatic kinds of spiritual displays that Luke tells of, and even though I can't give you a satisfactory theological or creedal or confessional explanation for what the Spirit of God is—nevertheless, the Spirit is for me what Paul said for all of us: The Spirit of the Lord is freedom, because where the letter kills, the Spirit gives life. Spiritual life. Faith for tomorrow.

Even where there are no tongues of flame or sermons preached in tongues.