**St. Aidan’s Episcopal Church**

**Day of Pentecost**

**Acts 2:1-21**

**Psalm 104:25-35,37**

**Romans 8: 14-17**

**John 14:8-17, 25-27**

**Real Spirit**

Some people think the Holy Spirit is a dove. But it’s not.

Some people think the Holy Spirit is the wind. But it’s not.

Some people think the Holy Spirit is fire. But it’s not.

What is a dove anyway? It is an easily identifiable white bird with a soft cooing sound, soothing to the ear. It doesn’t squawk or honk or even twitter or tweet, it coos. When the dove coos, it seems as if it is speaking directly to you, with a soft, gentle tone. It murmurs, as if appealing to your better senses to speak with equally gentle tread as you respond to the world around you.

And what of the wind. How does one define it? Is it not just a natural movement of air, moving at varying speeds and velocity, horizontally around the earth as it spins? It can be felt on one’s skin as a slight stirring of air, moving into a slight breeze, thereby providing relief on a warm day, perhaps carrying with it a sweet and pleasant aroma of roses, or new mown grass. It can be gusty, stopping and starting, taking one by surprise, as hats suddenly fly off, or papers become strewn across the back yard, flying in this direction or that. The wind can be biting when the air is frosty and can howl like the Hound of the Baskervilles, when caught amongst the trees, and when the wind really lets loose, it can move those same trees right out of the ground.

Fire is nothing to be played with. It can be a single candle flame, like those we see here, providing a path toward and into the prayerful sacred. Or one can imagine a fireplace with its flames warming man and beast, as well as the atmosphere inside a home, providing a welcoming message of safe and sure hospitality. But let loose of its boundaries, it can burn and consume, taking whatever it encounters down to its roots, leaving no other recourse for nature than to rebuild itself and to learn from the experience.

So who was it then, that first supposed the Holy Spirit was one of these? A dove, the wind, fire? Certainly not the Apostles.

According to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, when Jesus come up out of the waters of Baptism the heavens were opened to him and He saw the Spirit of God, descending LIKE a dove and alighting upon him. It was the Holy Spirit that entered into Jesus on that day, just as it enters into us in our own time, LIKE a dove. Sounding sweetly, gently, full of love, perhaps adding a soft timbre to Jesus’ voice, a cooing, healing sound, soft on the ears, encouraging to the soul.

The Apostle John spoke more than most about the wind as Spirit. However, he didn’t say the Holy Spirit WAS the wind. He said, “The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so IS everyone who is born of the Spirit.”[[1]](#footnote-1) But John wasn’t the first to recognize the power of the breath of God, the Ruach that reaches into the very heart of all it encounters. It was the Prophet Ezekiel who told of the Lord’s instruction that he should prophesy about the breath of God. It was Ezekiel who obeyed the Lord by prophesying that God’s breath would come from the four winds to breathe new life into the lifeless.[[2]](#footnote-2) The Holy Spirit says God, is LIKE the four winds, moving through this world according to its own directions, finding opportunities to reach into our hearts and souls, bringing new life into each, already so deadened by the daily news and the catastrophes that assault, the earth and all that is on it. Like the four winds, the Holy Spirit breathes new life into us in order that we may rise again, at the beginning of each new day, to keep on doing the work we have been commanded to do by God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Luke’s message in the scriptures from Acts we heard today, speaks of divided tongues AS of fire, appearing among the apostles and coming to rest upon each of them. And suddenly, there they were, filled with the Holy Spirit, speaking in differing languages, some of which they never knew they understood. Of course, the tongues of fire weren’t actual fire, if they were, they would have kept burning, turning everything they came in contact with on fire too, including the Apostles! We give thanks that such was not the case, and that the Apostles lived to tell the story of how they received the Spirit. They were direct witnesses of its power and have told us how it gave them the words they needed to turn indirection and indecision into active ministry with such breadth and depth that they were able to establish Christ’s Church on earth and begin a movement we know as Christianity.

The question that remains for us all today, is how on earth did twelve men, mostly simple fishermen and lowly peasants, set the entire world on a course that would move like the wind, carrying a soft message of love, and yet, with the power to set hearts on fire in such a way that the world would be changed forever. How did they do it, we ask, in such an oppressive atmosphere, in a world that was ready to stamp them out with murder, torture, stoning, and prison. How did they persevere through shipwrecks, earthquakes? How did they reconcile the real from the surreal as they encountered angels, conspiracies and conversions? And here begs the greater question: why can’t we do the same today!

Just as we clarified the true meaning of the Holy Spirit, perhaps we can begin to answer the question of what we can and must do today by clarifying what this relatively new entity called the Church is and is not.

First of all, we must stop thinking of the Church as an institution and start thinking about it as an organic entity. We don’t think of our bodies as just a bunch of cells, the Church is not just a oddly sorted collection of human beings. Just as your heart and soul is the life of your body, so the Holy Spirit is the life of the Church. Today we commemorate the birthday of that organism we call the Church, which lives and breathes today in ways the Apostles never dreamed it would. It just needs to catch a little more of the fire that descended upon the new-born Church at the time of the Apostles, so that it can add a little more fire to its message to the world of our own time.

This ancient story is deeply relevant to us and the world we live in today. Our world is just as hard and unpredictable as it was then: filled with corruption, violence, false pride, entitlement and immense need. The story of the Holy Spirit holds within it the guidance and direction for turning the Church and the world upside down yet again in a new way, in a language all can understand, no matter their heritage or culture.

It is the same Church as it was then, moving to electrify the world again with the Holy Spirit as its power source. It carries the same good news and the same last commandments from Jesus Christ, “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

To do that, we need to allow the Apostles to teach us about total trust and forward-thinking optimism. There is nothing standing in our way to achieving the same kind of spirit-filled success in turning the world into a more livable, loveable place other than our own lazy complacency. Jesus made it abundantly clear. He had brought the message from God to the Apostles, had shown them by example how to talk to people, how to heal hearts, now to turn hatred and revenge, hopelessness and fear into renewed hope, forgiveness, love and courage. And now it was time to leave them, as He had left them before, saying again,

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you."

Easy enough for them, you say? But how? Would it be better if Jesus were to walk down the nave this moment, and say exactly the same thing directly to us as He did to the Apostles? No. When he spoke to the Apostles, they didn’t really get his meaning at the time, any more than we do. It was when He sent the Spirit among them, that things began to make sense and must for us.

We welcome the Holy Spirit joyfully, because it is the Spirit that lives within us, not outside of us. It is the cooing voice of the dove, the rushing wind of insight, and the fire in the belly that gets us moving in the right direction; that stirs us into action with verve, energy and passion, whether we are up and about or sitting down.

The Holy Spirit moving within heart and soul is intimately involved with us, knows us, understands us, is inclined to let us know when we should be up and at the work we are called to do. Intimacy is the nature of love and the Holy Spirit is the nature of God’s love story to the Church and its people who are called to keep it real.

Thus, we have no excuse to sit back and survey the state of the Church today, wringing our hands and listening to the pessimists who think the Church is old news and dying. The message from Jesus hasn’t changed, and the need for the Good News to be spread anew into the world from the heart of a new Church hasn’t changed.

"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

God knows, we need Jesus, but the Holy Spirit, as part of the Triune God is as necessary as Jesus Himself. Just as, in order bring light into a darkened room, we need to plug into the power that generates electricity, so we need the Holy Spirit to plug into the power of God through Jesus Christ in order to be empowered into action and to live the kind of life as did Jesus Christ and as did the Apostles and the early Church.

It is the secret power of the Church which too often gets ignored, neglected or just plain forgotten. But no more. Remember that through 2,000 years of persecution, saints and martyrs, as well as profound doctrine, infallibility and consistency, she is now ours to care for and move forward. Only God, working inside her, not just on the outside or alongside, through the power of the Holy Spirit, can perform the miracle of revival in our age, in the same way as she has been revived in the past.

It is up to me and to you, and to countless Christians around the world who are celebrating the arrival of the Holy Spirit today.

On this Day of Pentecost, let us get with the Spirit by understanding fully what the Holy Spirit isn’t and what it really is!

It isn’t a white bird that flies from tree branch to tree branch, it is LIKE a dove, soft and sweet, loving and kind, gently urging hearts and souls into lovingly moving the hearts of souls of others.

It isn’t a breeze or even a tornado it is LIKE each one, and every kind of movement of air in between, delivering caresses that awaken, blowing hard against the sins of the world, and cleansing all that stands in the way of love and grace, and LIKE a tornado or a hurricane, blasting at hatred, racism and all forms of bigotry with passion and purpose.

The Spirit isn’t a candle flame or a wild fire, but it is LIKE each and every kind of fire in between. It can light up one’s urge to pray, it can warm cold hearts and homes, and can rage with passion, with no fear of push back or containment.

The Holy Spirit comes to us in all of these ways, at different times, and in different places and circumstances. What is the measure of your Spirit? Are you ready to receive it however it wishes to present itself in your life at any given moment? As a dove descending within you, as wind that cleanses all that must be cleansed, or as fire, filling your soul with passion to do God’s work in the world, left in trust to you by the prophets, by God, by Jesus Christ and the Apostles.

At the start, “…When He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”[[4]](#footnote-4)

And, guided by the Holy Spirit, filled with the REAL Spirit, they did their part in this story of the Church, the rest is up to us.

Amen.

Written to the Glory of God

E. J. R. Culver+

June 5, 2022

1. John 3:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ezekiel 37:9-14 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Matt. 28:19 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John 20:22 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)