

First Baptist Church of Augusta
Acts 2:1-4; 16-21
What Do We Mean By the Trinity: Holy Spirit
May 31, 2009

What do you think of when you hear a phrase like, *filled with the Holy Spirit* or *receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit*? It all sounds rather charismatic, doesn't it? When we were in Hungary earlier this month, one of the Roma gypsy students at the Gandhi School approached me and asked, in very broken English, did I believe in the Holy Spirit. I said, "Yes, certainly. The Holy Spirit is part of the Holy Trinity; God in Three Persons." I did not say all of that, of course, just simply "Yes, I believe in the Holy Spirit." She pressed me further and asked in halting words, did I have the gift of the Holy Spirit? "Yes, of course," I replied, but I thought to myself that I am grateful her English limits her from having a theological debate with me. I knew that she was a Pentecostal Christian. Glen Adkins told me later that what she wanted to know was, did I have the gift of speaking in tongues!

I come from a rather reserved tradition of worship and faith, where if you raise your hand in church it must mean you have a question, so, anything remotely Pentecostal leaves me rather uneasy. I suspect many of us here today, surrounded by the formalities of this sanctuary and our worship traditions share the same anxieties, when it comes to such talk of the Holy Spirit.

Too much talk about the gift of the Holy Spirit sounds, well, Pentecostal. Today, however, is called Pentecost Sunday, where we remember the descent or giving of the Holy Spirit, on the Jewish Day of Pentecost. In Hebrew history, it was a celebration of the first fruits of early spring, the earth coming alive! On this day, we are told in the New Testament book of Acts, that the disciples were together in one place, and a sound like a rushing violent wind or breath filled the entire house, and everyone inside was filled with the Holy Spirit. At least since the fourth century, Christians have been observing Pentecost Sunday, as the day God gave to the followers of Jesus the Holy Spirit. In a way, all Christians are Pentecostal.

On the day of Pentecost we celebrate three things:

1) God's Presence

I believe that when we decide to follow Jesus, the Holy Spirit abides among us as the very presence of God and Jesus. Just like one's conversion, there may not be anything particularly dramatic about God's gift, at least in comparison to what we have read today in Acts, but we have this gift given to us.

Last Saturday, Amy and I attended the graduation ceremony at Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology. These students had spent three or more years after graduating from college studying theology and Bible, and such preparing for a vocation in ministry. Stepping out of our car in the parking lot, someone on a big Harley Davidson pulled up right beside us. The motorcycle fit the rider. He was a man easily in his fifties, with a clean-shaven head and a long, gray goatee beard. I noticed that each ear was heavily laden with several hoop earrings, and up and down both arms were colorful tattoos. With his jeans and t-shirt he seemed completely out of place amidst dark suits and caps and gowns, but he, too, had his own cap and gown tucked beneath his arm. We walked alongside each other on the way to the place of graduation and I said "Congratulations on graduating." He grinned and thanked me and shared that he was not a Baptist like many of the graduates but a Pentecostal. "Ah." I thought to myself, "you fit the part." Wild, woolly, tattooed, untamed, unconventional, out of nowhere, Pentecostal, Holy Spirit filled, gifted, man of God. Maybe, this recent graduate is a picture of what we think of when it comes to the Holy Spirit. Maybe we are not too far off base.

The Presence of the Holy Spirit is a picture of the Presence of God, and the presence of God transcends all conventions and expectations.

On the Day of Pentecost we celebrate God's presence and...

2) God's Power

Acts 1:8

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you...

In the Book of Acts, the Holy Spirit just breaks out onto the scene in unpredictable and unsystematic ways. In fact, there is no organized theology regarding the Holy Spirit in Acts, even though there are over forty references. Sometimes the Holy Spirit arrives, following the laying on of hands, but, sometimes the Holy Spirit shows up on its own. Sometimes, the Holy Spirit comes *during* baptism and sometimes *after* baptism and sometimes *before* baptism. The spirit of God will not be conjured or controlled by anything anyone else does. It supports a wildness and unpredictability of God, who is alive and working.

It is like my motorcycle riding, goateed, tattooed, earring studded, Pentecostal preacher I met last Saturday – where did he come from?

Control is what we want. Preachers can't ride motorcycles or sport tattoos and don't even think about getting your ears pierced. Maybe, we want control because so much of life seems completely and utterly out of control.

Control is the one thing we cherish and often fiercely protect – our ability to manipulate or manage the situation. The season of Pentecost, however, is a reminder that for the faith community, we are not in control. Sure, we are to be responsible, and we are accountable for our actions. God did not create us to be puppets after all. But the season of Pentecost – when God empowered the church by His Holy Spirit – is a time to remind each other, we serve not on our own power or our own steam, but through the indwelling presence of God. We are – liturgically speaking – a Pentecostal people: filled with God's spirit and powered through his love.

In our text today, we are told that the Spirit of God came like a violent wind. It is the same word used for breath, and so, the people of God took a deep breath.

Has anyone ever told you to just take a deep breath? Amy and I have been learning in our weekly yoga classes the importance of good breathing. When there is stress and chaos going on in your life, in a very real way, you forget to breathe, and so, you wind up sighing a lot. When you feel deep stress, you breathe very shallow breaths. And, so, your body compensates for the lack of oxygen by making you sigh. Your body forces you to take a deep breath.

We go from task to task, and stress to stress, assuming that it is all about our power, our strength, our will. Followers of Jesus would do well to take a deep breath and breathe in the Holy Breath of God that empowers.

On the Day of Pentecost we celebrate God's presence and power and...

3) God's Purpose

...and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."
(Acts 1:8b)

I recognize I am in danger of preaching too much, of the importance of every member seeing his or her self as a missionary, and that this church is itself a sending station of missions. You hear me Sunday after Sunday, reminding you that we are a City on *this* Hill, that exists, not for its own sake, but for the sake of others.

I recall, however, the words of the late theologian, Dale Moody: *The church is mission, and where there is no mission there is no church.* (Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth*, p. 427)

We do not live for our own sake and for our own being. Even on the cellular level, we are entwined with others. God with us and in us, means that God also commissions us. And this commissioning has a radical inclusivity. It even includes weak-willed turncoats like Peter, the disciple. You remember him, don't you? Peter is the one who denied knowing Jesus, even though earlier he had made a big fuss about how he was willing to die for Jesus.

This same disciple now is ready to testify that not only is God present among us, and God's power is what enables us, but God has work for us to do. Peter turns to the Old Testament prophet Joel, for his sermon text:

Acts 2:17-18; 21: *'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. [18] Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy... [21] Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'*

The Holy Spirit of God is a thunderous presence and power, that decimates barriers and blooms purposeful life. Sons *and* daughters shall prophesy...young men will have visions and old men shall dream...slaves will no longer be bound, for the Spirit of the Holy God will fall upon them, too.

Our conventional selves, often fall back by stating what cannot be: "Wait a minute, women cannot prophesy, that would be like preaching, right? How can a young man have visions, when there is not tenured wisdom in youth? Old men dreaming dreams, come on. Shouldn't they be making end of life decisions and getting their affairs in order. Slaves have no say so in the matter – why give them false hope?"

We live conventional lives in a conventional world that is content enough to say, what we cannot do and what is not possible.

What a good gift this Holy Spirit is, because God is anything but conventional. When others say, what cannot be God, claims otherwise. The imperative "no" is redeemed into God's emphatic "yes." Jesus said, "The wind blows where it wills..." (John 3:8) and this means there is no one that can put a stop to what God is doing and desiring in the lives of God's people.

What is it in your life that God needs to fill up and burst wide? What have you been suppressing with your own "no" of impossibility that the Holy Spirit needs to shake loose and shake out? Where do you need to stop and take a deep breath, in order to remember the presence, the power and the purpose of God?

Isaiah 44:3: *For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring.*

God is here, not to do our personal bidding, or to bless our plans.

God is here, to be **present** to us in such a way, that what is profane around us and in us is redeemed.

God is here, to **empower** us and to shake us from the delusion of, "I can do this on my own."

God is here, to decimate our own self-serving and enslaving conventions, and to move us forward into sacred **purpose**, of setting right what has been made wrong in this world.

The wind blows where it wills...we cannot control...we cannot determine...we cannot will it...what we can do is join with God's presence, power, and purpose.