

Paraclete

^{CEB} **Acts 2:1-18** When Pentecost Day arrived, they were all together in one place. ² Suddenly a sound from heaven like the howling of a fierce wind filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be individual flames of fire alighting on each one of them. ⁴ They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak. ⁵ There were pious Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd gathered. They were mystified because everyone heard them speaking in their native languages. ⁷ They were surprised and amazed, saying, "Look, aren't all the people who are speaking Galileans, every one of them?" ⁸ How then can each of us hear them speaking in our native language?

⁹ Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; as well as residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the regions of Libya bordering Cyrene; and visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs--we hear them declaring the mighty works of God in our own languages!"

¹² They were all surprised and bewildered. Some asked each other, "What does this mean?"

¹³ Others jeered at them, saying, "They're full of new wine!" ¹⁴ Peter stood with the other eleven apostles. He raised his voice and declared, "Judeans and everyone living in Jerusalem! Know this! Listen carefully to my words! ¹⁵ These people aren't drunk, as you suspect; after all, it's only nine o'clock in the morning! ¹⁶ Rather, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young will see visions. Your elders will dream dreams. ¹⁸ Even upon my servants, men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.

Paraclete

Some branches of Christianity talk a lot about the Holy Spirit. We Presbyterians are less likely to say much about this part of the Trinity. I admit that I've never had tongues of fire dancing on my head. When I was baptized, nobody, least of all me, saw anything like a dove. I've never spoken in tongues, nor have I known anyone personally who did. I think we're uncomfortable thinking and talking about the Holy Spirit because our mental picture is about miraculous, erratic, and undignified behavior. That's not the sort of thing you'd expect in a church that's been called the "frozen chosen."

I know of a few people who've had strong and clear experiences of the Spirit and they've been a bit reluctant to talk about them publicly. It might cause people to think that they're weird or delusional. It might make others feel like they're second class Christians because they haven't had a similar experience. And it almost certainly would be a distraction in their relationships and conversations with other people.

We just read about tongues like fire and the sound of a violent wind. That may be the image that immediately comes to mind when the Holy Spirit is mentioned - strange, powerful, and miraculous. But there are multiple images regarding the Holy Spirit in scripture. At the other end of the spectrum, in 1 Kings 19:11-12, God comes to Elijah, not in wind, fire or earthquake, but in a thin, quiet voice. The Apostle Paul writes about people speaking in unknown tongues, ecstatic languages that are completely unknown -and that require that someone else have the gift to interpret to the rest of the church. On the other hand, on the day of Pentecost, the Spirit gave the disciples the ability to speak in foreign languages so that the various nationalities in the crowd could understand the message being preached. One gift requires a translator; the other eliminates the need for a translator.

A couple of years ago we did a study in adult education titled *The Meaning of the Cross*, written by David Lose. He recently wrote an article about the Holy Spirit that I think is quite helpful. In John's Gospel, in chapters 15 and 16, Jesus tells his disciples that he will send the Spirit to them after he leaves. The word used is *paraclete*. It's been translated as Comforter, Advocate, Counselor, Helper, and Companion. The New Jerusalem Translation gave up and didn't try to translate it - it just says Paraclete.

Paraclete is a compound Greek work that literally means, "To come alongside another." In this sense, the Paraclete can be an advocate – to come along side to defend and counsel – or comforter – to come along side to provide comfort and encouragement. But the one who comes along side might also do so to strengthen you for work, or to muster your courage, or to prompt or even provoke you to action.

In John, chapter 15, Jesus tells his disciples that he will leave them, but that he will send the *Paraclete* to be with them. The sense here is that they will not be accepted by the authorities, just as he has been rejected, but they will be comforted because the Holy Spirit will be with them. The Holy Spirit as Comforter eases our distress, encourages us, and comes to us in times of trouble to remind us of Jesus' presence and promises.

In today's reading about the holiday of Pentecost in the book of Acts the Holy Spirit is not comforting anyone but instead is shaking things up. There's nothing particularly comforting about the rush of a "violent wind," let alone descending tongues of flame. And once the disciples take their new multi-lingual ability into the streets of Jerusalem, pretty much everyone who witnesses their activity is described as "bewildered," "amazed" and "astonished." The Holy Spirit comes to prompt the disciples to make disturbing, disruptive, and world-changing testimony that calls into question the values of the world

In Romans chapter 8, Paul speaks of how the Spirit helps us name our inner hopes, desires, and longings that we have when we seek to be better followers of Christ.

Many of us are uncomfortable talking about the Holy Spirit. Our problem is that we have a very limited vision, an almost two-dimensional picture, of the Holy Spirit as only being involved in ecstatic whooping, shouting, and fainting. Because the Holy Spirit is part of the Trinity, I've felt like I needed to get over that and try to come to a better understanding of the Spirit. We really tend to separate the Trinity into three distinct and autonomous individual beings. It's no wonder that other religious traditions accuse us of having three gods, because in practice, that is what many of us tend to do.

Instead of picturing the Holy Spirit as a distinct individual in the Trinity who is sort of like the awkward cousin who acts out in public and is an embarrassment to the rest of the family, we need to understand the Spirit as God's own Spirit, the spirit of God's love, encouragement, and prodding to be a part of God's own hopes and vision for us. God's spirit helps equip us for the work of ministry with words of instruction, inspiration, and encouragement, so that we may embody through words and actions the grace and goodness of God. God's Spirit provides us with what we need at the time - comfort when we hurt, strength to carry on, encouragement when we are discouraged, and joy when we realize how much we are loved.

Not every dream, not every impulse, not every idea that pops into your head is from the Holy Spirit. John, in his first letter, chapter four, verse one, cautions us to "Test the spirits." Don't believe every spirit, every impulse, every idea that pops into your head. John says that we are to see if they are from God. Is it in the spirit of love? Is it self-serving or self-giving? Is it loving others as we have been loved? Does it promote justice for all? Is it kind? Does it fit in with what Jesus did and what Jesus taught?

On the other hand, we need to be open to moments of the Spirit's whispering and nudging. Don't demand tongues of flame before you'll pay attention. We're all part of a "mutual ministry committee." Look for – and expect! – the Holy Spirit to come along side us and shake things up, preparing and equipping each and all of us to share the disruptive, surprising, and life-giving word of grace of the God who will not rest until all people enjoy abundant life.

There's a morning ritual at my house. Our dog, Ginger, generally sleeps until one of us wakes up. Then she is suddenly, completely, enthusiastically awake! She nudges with her nose, she paws, she chews on my hand, she sings. Once I stand up, she runs in circles until I put a leash on her and step outside. Then it's nose to the ground sniffing, ears perked up and listening for birds, and a lot of excited running back and forth. I've always had a rather jaded view of all this as a drama queen's way of finding a good spot to relieve herself. But perhaps there's more, if I just open myself. Maybe, just maybe, she's also saying, "Get up, sleepy head! Let's go smell the grass and enjoy the birdsongs and rejoice in God's wonderful creation! And let's see what our loving Creator has in store for us today!" I don't know. But I do know that she greets the day with joy and enthusiasm and I could learn something from that. Be open to the voice of God's Spirit wherever you may experience it. Amen.

Don't fear or avoid God's Spirit.
But test every spirit you experience
to see if it reflects God's love and purposes.
Be open to hearing and feeling God's nudges and challenges.