

Holy Spirit: Who Is He?

June 12, 2011

Texts: Acts 2:1-21,

Not long after we moved to Lorena, one peaceful fall morning, a Tuesday I believe, my world was rattled by a sound so powerful that I felt its force in my chest. It wasn't a train; it's a good thing I like the sound of trains. It was a roaring sound lasting close to a minute like nothing I had ever heard or felt. The only sound similar I could think of was the drum line practicing at the high school near our home in Arlington. So, I called the school to ask and, no, their band was not practicing at that hour. I asked various people that day and the next until I found someone else who heard it and knew what it was. It was a rocket engine test at the rocket plant in McGregor over ten miles away. I remembered hearing someone describe the experience of witnessing a Space Shuttle launch, how they could feel the power of the blast in their whole body. What at first scared me, actually turned out to be the sound of the power that could soon carry our American astronauts into space.

That roaring sound breaking-into our peaceful world could be described as an **IRRUPTION**, a word that sounds like "eruption" such as a volcano, except it means **breaking in** rather than breaking out. That is how William "Will" H. Willimon, now Bishop of the United Methodist Church, describes the experience of disciples on Pentecost we read in Acts 2 (*Interpretation: A Bible Commentary, Acts*; John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1988). The **Holy Spirit** breaking into the lives of Jesus' followers that day was a unique, supernatural event that redefined their role in Jesus' kingdom and welded them together as God's family changing the course of human history. That power profoundly transformed and propelled out into the world by the powerful blast of the Holy Spirit. That led to thousands coming to faith in Jesus, and **The Church was born.** Pentecost is the "Birthday of the Church."

The Holy Spirit may be the least known person of the Holy Trinity. What do we really know about the Holy Spirit? Was the Pentecost event something that was totally "out of the blue?" Peter tells the people gathered there that it was what had been foretold many centuries before. The **Spirit of God** (as is usually written in the Old Testament) has always been present and active in human history and even in creation itself **Breaking-Into** our world demonstrating love and care:

- **Gen. 1:2** NIV "The **Spirit of God** was hovering over the waters" as creation began. (The same word in Heb. May be translated "spirit," "wind," "breath.")
- **Gen. 6:3** God tells Noah that **God's Spirit** will not remain or tolerate the arrogance and cruelty of humans and will set a time of 120 years until their destruction by the flood. Though

Noah declared God's plan to destroy them if they continued, none but Noah's kin were saved. After waiting for the water to recede after the rain he sending out a dove until it returned with an olive twig in its beak, a symbol of the presence of God's Spirit still working in the world.

- **Exodus 2** Moses tending sheep in the wilderness, observes a bush ablaze but is not consumed. He discovered it was actually the presence of God, or **Spirit of God** calling him to serve as deliverer for God's people to lead them from Egypt to Canaan, the Promised Land.
- **Judges, Kings** God raised up individuals, i.e. **Gideon, Deborah, Sampson, Samuel, Saul, David** to be Judges or Kings for the people and/or lead God's people against their enemies.
- **Psalm 51** David repents to God after being confronted by the prophet Nathan about his adultery with Bathsheba and the conspiracy-murder of her husband, Uriah. In vs. 11 he pleads for God to re-create his spirit (mind and will) clean as before and not take away the **Holy Spirit** from him, his connection with God and the source of his wisdom and power.
- **Matthew 3:16 (Mk. 1:10, Lu, 3:22)** The Holy Spirit is present at Jesus' baptism in the form of a dove descending and lighting on him as the Father speaks a blessing over him.
- **Isaiah 61** The later prophet Isaiah writes to the Jews who were recently released from seventy years of slavery in Babylon and then returned to Jerusalem. Jesus chose a portion of this passage to announce his ministry to the people of Nazareth(Lu. 4:16-30):
The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD'S favor...

Throughout Israel's exodus experience the **Spirit of God** was with them as a column of cloud (smoke) by day and a pillar of fire at night, visible symbols of God's loving presence with them in the difficult 40-year trek in the wilderness. Exodus tells us Moses often spoke and met with God as a friend, even allowing him to see God's "back." God's presence on Mt. Sinai was marked by storm clouds, wind, and flashing lightning. God's presence has been powerfully demonstrated in a variety of ways throughout the ages from the beginning of time. On the opposite end of the spectrum of demonstrations of the Spirit of God might be the peaceful symbol of the dove returning to Noah after nearly six months on the ark during the flood. The message in the Bible of our loving God shows

when God decided to address a need or crisis, God's Spirit came upon an individual or number of people, men and women, to save and deliver God's people.

What happened that day of Pentecost to Jesus' timid followers had similarities to other occasions of God's work in the world. The wind-sound and flames are elements common in ancient stories. In Moses' time God worked with the Israelites to form them into a people to preserve the story of God's work in human history and tell the world of God's love for all. The signs demonstrated on Pentecost by God's Spirit within these ordinary people served to form them into the stalwart body, the Church to be God's dynamic messengers, **not** unlike what God had done at various times throughout biblical history.

The Gospel of John, especially chapters 14-16, tells much of what Jesus said about the Holy Spirit. He promised the disciples that when he went back to heaven God would send the Spirit back to them. They already knew the Spirit because of the Spirit's presence in Jesus on earth (Jn. 14:17). He and the Father would make their home within them by the Holy Spirit (v. 23). God's presence in our hearts is a mighty force greater than a rocket blast working with us to accomplish what God intends for us.

A. Wetherall Johnson shares a story in her autobiography *Created For Commitment* (the founder of "Bible Study Fellowship"):

Before the second World War, there was a grave in Germany sealed with a granite slab and bound with strong chains. On it an atheist had inscribed, "Not to be opened throughout eternity." Yet somehow a little acorn had fallen into some crack... Years after, everyone saw a huge oak tree which had completely broken up the slab, still having the inscribed arrogant words. The new life of the acorn had openly displayed the power of life.

Like the acorn, God's Holy Spirit broke into human life, our lives as individuals as well as the whole group of believers, the Church. Our God loves the whole world so much that he cannot bear to watch us hopelessly harm each other and creation itself. Like the roar of the rocket engine that grabbed my attention that morning, the sound of the strong wind the morning of Pentecost brought people from every part of the world together to hear God's message. Our Creator-God offers each and every person what is even more amazing, to enter into intimate partnership with us in our hearts, to grow us into whom we were meant to be and do what we were created to do. **Does that get your attention?**