

Pentecost is a Greek word meaning 50. Last week we remembered the ascension that took place 40 days after Easter. And then the disciples waited in Jerusalem for 10 days for the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost, today, is the day we celebrate this pouring out of the Spirit upon the church. But it was first the Jewish festival where they, 50 days after Passover, celebrate God's giving the Law to Moses on Sinai. I like the connection between the two celebrations. We've been given the Law and we've been given the Spirit—both signs of God's love and care for us, of God acting for us in love. That's what Jesus' followers were doing together—celebrating the Jewish festival of Pentecost. When the most un-Presbyterian of events occurred. The Spirit showed up.

I don't know what they were expecting, as they sat around waiting for Jesus instructions to play themselves out, but I suspect it wasn't this: "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."

Let's not sanitize this story. It is strange. And it is one of those stories that seems so strange it must be true. I have a hard time figuring out why someone would make it up. Rush of a violent wind, tongues as of fire landing on their heads, and then they start speaking.

While I love Pentecost, it also scares the bejeebers out of me. As you have no doubt discovered, I have some control issues. And the Holy Spirit defies all of those attempts for control. Presbyterians tend to be suspicious of the Holy Spirit. Because she does not do things "decently and in order" and does not seem limited by our Book of Order. Nor does she wait for the Session to vote. The Spirit moves where she will.

When I was in seminary, in my Theology class, on the day we were talking about the Holy Spirit, one of my classmates showed up as the lecture was beginning and he was dressed up like one of the characters from the movie Ghost Busters. He told the professor, "I hear we are talking about Ghosts today, and I came prepared." The class laughed, but one of the professors said, "isn't it just like a Presbyterian to try to extinguish the Spirit".

There are legitimate reasons why we are suspicious of the Spirit. Because people will claim, "I don't need to listen to you. I'm led by the Spirit". And then they'll go off and do something hateful and mean. We are right to use the brains God gave us to observe what people say and do and then discern if we think they are Spirit led...

Like when people claim that the gifts of the Spirit that they've received make them better Christians than those people who have not received gifts.

Or when Christians talk to their friends and families who are dealing with job loss, medical concerns, or other problems and say, in all sincerity, "If only you had prayed more, God would have healed you (or gotten you a job or whatever)."

Or when they protest at the funeral of a gay or lesbian who was killed in a hate crime, as they did when Matthew Shepherd was murdered.

Or when they claim that Hurricane Katrina was God's punishment for either the licentiousness and sin of New Orleans or, as Pat Robertson said on the 700 Club, Katrina was God punishing America for keeping abortion legal.

Not all people who claim to speak in the name of the Spirit, in the name of God, are actually speaking in God's name.

But there are some things in this text that can help us in our discerning about which activities are the work of the Spirit and which might not be.

*When the Spirit shows up in Acts, the gift that the people receive is the gift of understanding. Some people refer to it as the gift of tongues, but it is very different from the practice in some Christian traditions. Rather than people speaking a language that nobody else understands, when the Spirit came upon the assembled folks, people start speaking the languages of everyone else there so that they could *understand* what was being spoken.*

People were there from every nation under heaven. And these Galilean fishermen start speaking Greek, Latin, Ugaritic, Akkadian, Arabic, Spanish, French, German, Korean, Chinese, and Swahili. Maybe even Klingon. This wasn't a display of the tongue speakers' spiritual awesomeness that allowed them to do something that you and I can't

do. This was a display of the Holy Spirit working through faithful people so that other people could understand and so that people could come together.

Perhaps, if we prayed for the Spirit to come, we wouldn't start speaking French, Russian or Pig Latin. Perhaps a liberal would start speaking in ways that a conservative would understand. Perhaps mothers would start speaking in ways that teenage boys can understand. Perhaps we could start speaking in ways that Catholics, Fundamentalists, Jews, Muslims, LDS, and Buddhists could come together in understanding and work for peace.

Consider the Spirit. Peter claims to the crowd that the Spirit of God has come as a fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh and your sons and daughters shall prophesy and your young women shall dream dreams...and everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

But it wasn't just given to a few. It was poured out upon all. Not because of their particular strengths or weaknesses, but because *they were there*. Sometimes that is how God works. Being in community matters. It is in community that you receive the spirit. While it happened to individuals, this was not a personal event. This was an event of the community.

And the spirit didn't cause them to all speak one language. They were speaking many languages, but because of the Spirit, they could hear about God's deeds of power, each in their own language.

So perhaps we need to spend less time trying to get everyone around us to speak our language—literally, or culturally, or theologically, or politically—and spend more time discerning how we hear about God's deeds of power from people speaking other languages, trusting that the Spirit will allow us to hear. Trusting that the Spirit of God has the power to bring understanding.

Perhaps Pentecost should be more than one liturgical day and should be an entire season in church life. A season that lasts 52 weeks a year or so. Because the reminder to call upon the Spirit should not be a 'once a year' sort of thing.

If you remember back to the text we heard this morning from Ezekiel's prophecy about the dry bones, there is good news in this text that shouldn't be relegated to one day a year.

Ezekiel describes a gruesome sort of scene, a valley of bones (show picture). And there are days when we resemble that picture. Physically, spiritually, communally, personally. But the good news here is that God speaks to us when we are like that. "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD."

Even when, especially when, we are at our emptiest, our most alone, our most lifeless, God speaks words of hope and of a future. And God breathes the Spirit into us.

If you have your Bibles open to the Ezekiel passage, it is an interesting progression. The bones become bodies again. Sinew, flesh and skin are layered onto the bones, but they were still dead bodies without breath. The New Revised Standard Version translates the Hebrew this way: Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."

The Hebrew word for breath is the same word for Spirit and wind. Ruach. Maybe this counts as my speaking in tongues for the day. Ruach.

So this verse could just as easily be translated this way: Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the Spirit, prophesy, mortal, and say to the Spirit: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O Spirit, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."

As God breathed God's own Spirit into the Nation of Israel in the time of exile in Babylon, so too did God breathe God's own Spirit into the followers of Jesus 50 days after the crucifixion and resurrection. And the parallels are real. Who might have needed new life more than a group of people whose leader had ascended into the clouds, leaving them to figure out what to do next?

So, God's breath, God's ruach, gave new life to people in exile, and to people adrift without their leader and unsure of where to go next. And the rest of the Book of Acts describes what happens to people when they are led by the Spirit.

God says:

I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act," says the LORD.

So, where in our lives do we feel like dry bones or lost disciples? Where do we need God's breath to enter us, giving us new life and understanding? We're at the end of another program year in the church. Today we've thanked Teachers for their year of service. And next week we'll be installing new Elders and Deacons, thanking some others for their years of service.

Perhaps it is in our volunteering here at church where you need the Holy Spirit to give you new life and energy. Because the work of the church is too exhausting, and too vast, to rely on ourselves to do. It must be given life by the Spirit.

Perhaps you need God's breath to give you new life in relationships that have become difficult.

Perhaps God is calling you to new ways to love and serve the church, but you need the Holy Spirit to give you the courage to step forward and serve.

Wherever it is for you that needs new life, ask God to send the Holy Spirit. But remember that she is not yours to control. She may send you places you never planned to go. She may cause you to speak languages you didn't know you could speak. She may give life where you only saw a valley of dry bones.

May we have the courage to call on the Spirit and the eyes to see the work of the Spirit in our lives and in the lives of others. Amen.

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.