

*A Gentle Tug*  
A Sermon on Acts 2 and John 15 and 16 by the Rev. Philip Major  
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ May 19, 2024

Today we celebrate the Christian version of the Jewish Feast of Pentecost. Fifty days after the first day of Passover, Jews from all over the ancient world travelled to Jerusalem, for the Festival of Shavuot, which was also called Pentecost.

This is the setting for our reading from the Acts of the Apostles. The eleven disciples were in Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish festival of Pentecost, along with great crowds of Jews, many of whom had travelled from distant lands. *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.*

This is a beautiful and powerful story. We think of it as the birth of the church. But the story of Pentecost is a fairly unique example of the movement of God's Spirit in our lives. Let's consider the movement of the Holy Spirit in broader terms, and the ways the Holy Spirit moves in our lives.

First let's consider the different names we have been given for the Holy Spirit. In some of the Hebrew Scriptures the Holy Spirit is called the 'Spirit of God'. But some of the Jewish traditions took great pains to not say the name of God, out of respect for God's divinity. In these traditions the Spirit of God is referred to as 'The Holy Spirit'.

Jesus continues this trend of using multiple, alternative names for the Spirit in the Farewell Discourse, his last sermon for the disciples, the source for our Gospel passage. In John 15 and 16 Jesus calls the Holy Spirit, 'The Spirit of Truth' and also 'The Advocate'. The word translated as *Advocate* is the Greek word *paracletos*. The word 'paraclete' literally means 'to call alongside another'. Jesus is describing the Holy Spirit as the one who is alongside us, and calls to us. In your Bible you might notice that the word 'paraclete' is variously translated as 'advocate', or as 'counselor', or as 'helper'.

In Genesis chapter one the Spirit of God is described in yet another way, as the breath or wind of God. "The earth was a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep, and the breath or wind of God swept over the face of the waters." In this verse from Genesis, the Hebrew word referring to the wind or breath of God is "ruach". The word "ruach" is both masculine and feminine. Here and elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures the Holy Spirit is at times described in feminine terms, and sometimes in masculine terms. As always in the Hebrew Scriptures, God's presence is seen in the natural world, which is God's creation.

In the Hebrew Scriptures God's spirit is sometimes given to an individual and sometimes given collectively to a group of people. This is the case in Isaiah 42 where God describes giving the Spirit to the nation of Israel, his servant people. The prophet Joel, quoted in the book of Acts, similarly describes the gift of the spirit being given collectively to a group of people: *I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young people shall see visions, and your elders shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit.*

But it is more common for the Spirit of God to speak to us as individuals in quiet ways, in ways that are difficult to discern. At the beginning of the book of Samuel, Samuel is a boy, serving as an assistant to Eli, who is one of the leaders of the nation of Israel. Samuel is sleeping and is awakened by a voice calling his name, but he does not understand the Spirit of God is speaking to him.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, gifts of the Holy Spirit are temporary, not permanent. In Psalm 51 we sing, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew your Holy Spirit within me." It would be contrary to the Jewish tradition to assume that when a person experiences a movement of the Holy Spirit, they are somehow in possession of the Holy Spirit from that time to the end of their lives.

In the Hebrew tradition the Spirit of God often gives people courage and direction to speak out against the actions and intentions of kings and other leaders. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the prophets of Israel repeatedly spoke truth to power, risking their own lives. In the Hebrew tradition the Holy Spirit encourages people to take just, righteous actions, even when those actions will not bring them glory or power.

In almost all cases, the movements and guidance of the Holy Spirit appear in private or subtle ways. This characteristic of the Holy Spirit makes the idea and work of the Holy Spirit susceptible to confusion and manipulation by people. The works of the first person of the trinity, the Great Creator of the Worlds, are evident for everyone to see. The example and witness of Christ Jesus are well presented and evident in the New Testament.

God speaks to you and to me through the Holy Spirit, but like the boy Samuel, we often have difficulty understanding the message, or even understanding that God is speaking to us. People have even made claims of acting at the direction of the Holy Spirit in situations where their actions appear to be for the accumulation of their own power and glory. Yet the fact that people have abused the idea of the Holy Spirit is no argument against the reality of God speaking to us through the Spirit. And the tendency of the Spirit to speak to us indirectly and quietly does not mean we should stop listening.

I encourage you to listen for movements and directions of the Spirit in your life. I am pretty sure the movement of the Spirit will not be accompanied by anything spectacular, like little tongues of fire appearing on top of your head. That means you will need to be paying attention. That means you will need to slow down, and really listen.

I encourage you to listen for movements and directions of the Spirit of Truth in your life. For most of us, the Spirit encourages us to move more strongly into the primary direction of our lives. We see this in the story of the Apostles in the Book of Acts. The disciples had already been instructed by Jesus to heal and care for the people who were in most desperate need. After their encounter with the Spirit at Pentecost they continued this work in deeper, more profound ways. The same is true for you. God's Spirit is encouraging you to move more deeply into the primary direction of your life.

I cannot tell you the context or where you will hear the directions of the Spirit most clearly. You might be alone, lying in your bed, as Samuel was. You might understand the Spirit to be speaking to you through a dream, as the Spirit spoke to Mary and Joseph in dreams. You might hear the Spirit speaking to you through another person, as the Spirit spoke to King David through the prophet Nathan. You might hear the Spirit speaking to you as you are with a group of people, as the disciples gathered together in one room at Pentecost.

I have seen the many, diverse ways you are seeking and serving God's people. I have no doubt that God is, in fact, leading you. You and I are not likely to receive the Hollywood version of the Holy Spirit. But I am pretty sure that you have felt a gentle tug on yourself, a gentle tug as from a young child grabbing the hem of your pants or the hem of your skirt, pulling you in the right direction.

I encourage you to listen for movements and directions of the Spirit, the 'ruach', the breath of God in your life. What will she say? She will give you a message you may have heard before, or perhaps a message you have never heard.

I encourage you to listen for the Holy Spirit because God has some important work for you to do. Even more, I encourage you to listen for the movements and directions of the Holy Spirit because you are God's beloved child, and God's deepest intention is for you to be whole and healthy and strong. God loves you. God is nudging you towards wholeness and goodness through the gentle voice of the Holy Spirit. God is seeking after you, like a heavenly parent.