



“Spirit of Wind and Fire”

Texts: Romans 8:22-27 and Acts 2:1-21

a sermon by the Rev. Anna von Winckler

Pentecost Sunday - May 19, 2024

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Doesn't the sanctuary look beautiful? I want to thank the worship committee for their time and creativity in making the sanctuary so nice.

I wanted to make the worship space look different for today; for our celebration of Pentecost, because I want us to be thinking about the Spirit of God in all of the Spirit's complexity and power. We often think of the Spirit of God as the gentle dove. In my readings this week, one writer referred to the Spirit as the feminine side of God, but I think God is all the good that is within us, whether that be thought of as traditional male or female attributes. Here the Spirit of God comes as a violent wind and as tongues of fire. Nothing gentle or traditionally feminine about that. The Spirit of Wind and Fire.

Presbyterians are known for being educated, doing things decently and in order. Everything very cerebral. Talk of the Spirit is kept at that cerebral level because we wouldn't want emotion to come into play. And, I know for some of you, coming from pentecostal roots, too much Spirit talk might evoke negative emotions from the past. The Pentecostals are known as the “Holy Rollers”, and on the other side of that are the Presbyterians, who are known as the “Frozen Chosen”. But there is something that is neither emotion or thought. It is that deeper inner part of us that defy words or definition and it is where the Spirit comes to us to minister to us and help us minister to others. So, if we don't embrace the Spirit on that deeper level that is neither cerebral or emotional, then we will be missing out on the power of the Spirit to change us and to use us fully for the glory of God.

I want to talk to you this morning about the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in the world today. I love talking about the Spirit, because it is through the Spirit that we find God in a real and living way. The Spirit is alive and active, working in ways that we may not always see or understand. There is so much going on that we do not always attribute to the work of the Spirit. So we need to be looking for the ways that God is made manifest among us through the Spirit.

I'd like to start with the Romans passage: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies."

I remember while in high school our youth group did a Bible study on Romans. I specifically remember discussing this sentence about the inward groanings; and jumping down a few verses "the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."

As I've mentioned before, in high school and college, my family was going through a difficult time. My eldest brother was severely drug addicted. The pain of seeing a loved one suffering so can make it hard to pray. Or, should I say, the pain is beyond words and the need and desperation so great that words cannot express that.

Can you relate to those feelings? When a loved one dies, especially unexpectedly; when a terminal diagnosis is given and there is still so much more you want to do; when, as a friend posted on Facebook recently, the prodigal son is beyond human reach and the situation is totally out of your control; how are there words to adequately express the need, the pain, the hope that just isn't coming? How do we pray when the pain is so great?

And it is not just those things that are intimate to us, but is also the more universal things - the fear of authoritarianism becoming the rule of law and not democracy and what that would mean to my life and those I love? Climate change, the groanings of creation, as Paul states, is loud and clear. Or, as one person wrote when he cried at seeing Auschwitz and reading about all those lives lost and knowing that senseless war continues throughout the world, the pain was so great and words could not express what he felt. The groanings that came through his tears. The groanings of our hearts, whether it be for ourselves or others, for our world. But the Spirit is there to both hear and to express those feelings those needs to God - and God knows and God hears and God acts.

The event of Pentecost was not meant to be a one-time event. Perhaps seeing fire come down and the ability to speak in a foreign language suddenly was, but the power to do God's work through the Holy Spirit was not. The Spirit is meant to encourage believers and help them to find direction and hope as they go about sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ.

I know that when I started here I preached on the Isaiah passage that is found in Peter's words to the crowd; that your sons and daughters will prophecy and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. These prophecies and visions and dreams are meant to give hope to the people to give shape to the ministries and future ministries of the people. They are to help people understand that God is in control, even if we don't see it in the everyday moments of our lives.

It is why I am hopeful for each church I'm at as they search for their new pastor. God is at work and God will bless. There is no need to worry or be anxious as you wait for this new person to arrive. God is bringing to fullness what God wants to happen in this time.

Paul writes: 'Hope that is seen is a limited kind of hope, for if we can see manifestations of it, it is certain to be limited to what we are able to now behold. But something greater is in store for believers, something that makes all the mess we see around us and experience pale in comparison.' Hope. Hope that is unseen. And we know it is there through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. Hope for you and for me, for our country and for the world.

Peter Storey, who was the Methodist Bishop of South Africa during the time of apartheid, developed the idea of the "Great Nevertheless of God." For example: while surrounded by the strong-armed agents of repression, Storey knew that the Holy Spirit was active in South Africa. The government had the power, *nevertheless*, God was with the poor in South Africa. The South African regime did not hesitate to use force in order to stop the rebellion; *nevertheless*, Storey, along with the great theologian Desmond Tutu and others, led the black South Africans in a peaceful revolution. The odds were against them, but *nevertheless*, with God on their side, they were victorious. In the end, there was a strong temptation to retaliate; *nevertheless*, God gave them the means to forgive enemies and then to form a reconciled nation.

That is the hope that comes in the violent wind and the tongues of fire. The Spirit of God, the *nevertheless Spirit of God* continues to lead and provide. So, no matter what pain you are feeling today and can't seem to find the words in prayer, don't worry; because, *nevertheless*, the Spirit of God is there intervening on your behalf.

You don't need to worry about who the next pastor will be or when that person might arrive, because God knows. Trust the Spirit to do God's part, to lead and provide; and, continue to do your part for God and the church by dreaming your dreams and having your visions and moving forward with those dreams and visions God has given you. You don't need to worry about climate change or authoritarianism, because one way or another, in ways we may not see or understand, God will continue to be at work giving us a future and a hope. As we are told in Ezekiel, God can raise dry bones and make new life. God brought Israel back to life and does the same for us today. Remember that whatever you experience or see or read about that causes anxiety or fear: *Nevertheless, God is present and at work.*

So pray, and live your life filled with the Spirit; and trust in God's Spirit. And when you feel the wind upon your skin or hear the wind rustling in the trees, or see the candles lit each Sunday, may you be reminded of God's Spirit descending on those early disciples and has descended upon you, as well; that the gift of God's Spirit continues in and around us to this day. Be at peace and in all things give praise and glory to God. Amen.

First Presbyterian Church Staff:

Pastor
Director of Music
Children and Youth Ministry Coordinator
Office Administrator

Anna von Winckler
Robert Nicholls
Carrie Aiken
Lora Blaylock



609 South East Second Street
Evansville, IN 47713
(812) 423-6297
www.fpcev.com

First Presbyterian Church
is a partner congregation with
the Covenant Network
of Presbyterians.

