

The Rev Barbara Ballenger

Why did Jesus' followers need the Holy Spirit? Why weren't their years accompanying Jesus, their personal witness to his stories and teachings and miracles, their commitment to him, the miracles they witnessed, the resurrection appearances – why wasn't all this enough to form the faith that would allow them to lead the early church and keep it going?

The answer is tucked in Holy Week, in John's account of the Last Supper, which continues to be our Sunday Gospel even though we are 50 days since the resurrection. The followers of Jesus are still gathered in the upper room with him back on the other side of Easter. They are all still reclined around that Last Supper banquet, still getting their instructions from Jesus about what is to come and they still do not understand what is in store. They are on the fulcrum between the Jesus that they knew and spent three years of their lives following, and the one who would come to them after the resurrection.

And what Jesus gives them to help them keep the balance between those two extremes is .. a promise, that he would send help.

Because Jesus on the night before he died, knew that, in addition to his several chapters of last-minute advice, his followers will need his very spirit within them to allow to be what God was calling them to be after Easter. They don't have to wait long. Three days later in John's Gospel, Jesus delivered that advocate personally, when he appeared to them on the first day of the week, the day of his resurrection, and breathed upon them: receive the Holy Spirit.

In contrast, In the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of Apostles, which can be considered one long text by the same author, the Holy Spirit takes 50 days to arrive. This was our first reading, the familiar story of Pentecost -- the story of the Spirit entering the house where the disciples were gathered, descending on them in tongues as of flame to cinematic effect – the birthday of the church. It was a profound visitation, not only to them but to all who were gathered in Jerusalem. Pentecost to the people of Israel was a traditional harvest festival, and it also marked the length of days between the Passover and God's gift of the Law to Moses on Mt. Sainai. Jews from all over the Mediterranean world came to Jerusalem for this festival. Luke makes the disciples wait 50 days for a reason, and they do it with grace and lots of prayer and singing.

But whether it was in the form of a breath or in thunder and flame, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the followers of Jesus brought their own resurrection – their new life in God. And the faith that it kindled was a faith not just in their savior Jesus, but a faith in themselves – a faith that they could become a body for Christ's spirit after his own body had ascended into Heaven.

Without the Holy Spirit residing in them, they could not do what Jesus had called them to do – even greater things than he had done – the miraculous work of bringing God's love to everyone in a world that resisted it at every turn. It was the same Spirit that Jesus relied on to do his work among them. He knew that the Kingdom couldn't come without it.

Oh there was plenty Jesus' followers could do on their own steam: they could love one another, and share their goods, and tell stories, and show up for prayer and worship on Saturday and Sunday.

They needed Jesus's spirit in a way that pushed them from within, rather than beckoned them to follow. They needed His Spirit in them so God could speak through them – the kind of Word that allowed all to hear it as though it were spoken in their own language. This was the Word that prompted people to be baptized on the spot, or to pay attention to their dreams and visions, or to rise from the dead. The disciples couldn't do that with their own human gifts. But With the Holy Spirit working through them they could forgive sins, heal what was broken, raise what had died, show the way to Kingdom.

None of us can do that on our steam, because that is God's work. It is God's work through us. It the work that God does through the church in the world, when it cooperates.

Which is why it's also important to remember that the Holy Spirit needed Jesus followers, as much as they needed her. Perhaps what Jesus had been doing all along – all those wonderous and maddening years – was to make his disciples ready to house the Holy Spirit within themselves. He did this in the way he called them, formed them, taught them, inspired them, chastised them, and worked them to the bone. Why? To make them into a home for the Holy Spirit for Jesus' divine life, God's own power – he was forming them into church.

This is what it means to Christ's body in the world; it is to be a home for God's Spirit to do what she was sent to do. This is the new life that we commit to in our baptism; we promise to be a home for God, and God's Spirit fills us and fuels us. We are the body and God is the breath. Our Body and Blood is God's Body and Blood. We are one – not as the end point, but as the point of departure. If we are God's house then we are more like a mobile home.

Pentecost is one of those times in the story of faith where Heaven touches Earth and extraordinary things happen as a result. Theologian NT Wright says the whole point of Pentecost is that “ through the Spirit, some of the creative power of God ... comes from heaven to earth and does its work there... “

“ The point is to transform the earth with the power of heaven.” He says... “Starting with the ...bodies, minds, hearts and lives of Jesus' followers.”¹

Even though the wild entry of the Spirit as described in the Book of Acts made an immense impact, the flow of the Spirit into the people of God was not a one-and-done event. Throughout the stories of the people of God the Holy Spirit arrives by touch, by dream, by water and by witness. As in any theophany, sometimes she's an earthquake and sometimes she's a whisper. But always she is a force to be reckoned with.

And why do we need the Holy Spirit?

Why aren't our years of Godly Play, and church attendance, and our mad gift of welcoming, and our commitment to leading a good life enough? Why isn't Easter enough? Why do we need Pentecost?

¹ NT Wright Acts for Everyone

Well Pentecost is about God's agenda, not ours. It's about letting the Holy Spirit fill the home that we have been formed into through all that Godly Play and Church attendance and welcoming and trying to be good people. That is the shape that spirit takes when she enters us and makes a home within us.

Pentecost is kind of a lot. It is a relationship with the Divine that requires our permission. And we give that permission every time we repeat our baptismal promises as we will today. And we make those promises over and over again because we are never the same people we were before. This house is constantly changing, with our experiences, our joys and losses, our understandings and misunderstandings. And this house that we are changes as the world around it changes, and demands more love and compassion and forgiveness from us that we can produce on our own.

This Pentecost, the world looks much different than it did last time this year. My faith in it is deeply shaken, and my faith in myself is as well. Everything that I understand the Gospel to stand for is under attack right now – it's work of love and reconciliation and redemption and welcome is in the crosshairs. I'm not sure I've ever needed an outpouring of the Holy Spirit in my life, and in the life of the church, more.

And while I'm ringing my hands and trying to clear the fog in my head, I wonder if the Holy Spirit isn't just pounding on the door to my upper room, saying "ask me, ask me, ask me in."

Now to be honest it makes me just a bit uneasy to pray for such an outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon this church to equip us for this time. What if we don't want to do what she wants us to do? What if we don't want to go where she wants to send us?

But I think the promise of Pentecost is that if you ask for it, help will come. And I think the reality of Pentecost 2025 is that we need help. We need to be church in a whole different gear.

So I'm going to offer a prayer for the Holy Spirit to be released at St Peter's in a way that will make it clear to us how we are to be God's vessels of love and justice at this time. If you'd like to be in on it, then just bow your head and when I say **we pray**: you respond Come Holy Spirit. After that we'll renew our Baptismal promises and have a round of sprinkling, which we do every year. But perhaps this time there will be steam.

Because sometimes you just have to be really specific with God in prayer, and hope that God will be really specific right back.

The response is Come Holy Spirit

Divine Helper, Jesus said he would send you to assist us in being the church that God needs in the world. We want to be your church in new and powerful ways and ask for your outpouring upon us. And so we pray **Come Holy Spirit**.

Divine Comforter, our hearts are broken at all who are suffering at the hands of evil right now – whose lives, wellbeing, dignity, health, identity, jobs, futures – are in peril. Help us to be comforters and allies and friends to all you send our way. And so we pray **Come Holy Spirit**.

Divine Advocate, show us where we are to direct our voices, resources, wills, energy when there is so much work to do. Send us to where we should go. And so we pray **Come Holy Spirit.**

Spirit who hovered over the waters at the making of the universe, the earth cries out to you as her climate warms, and her waters rise, her glaciers melt and her species pass away. Empower us to protect this island home. And so we pray **Come Holy Spirit.**

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful
and kindle in them the fire of your love.

Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created,
and you shall renew the face of the earth.

Amen.