

How do you picture the Holy Spirit? Throughout the Bible we hear the spirit described as the breath of God, as wind, as a dove, and this morning as tongues of fire. The Rev. Nadia Bolz Weber tells a story about a gift her church received of paraments, which are cloths that adorn the altar, pulpit, communion table and other parts of a church sanctuary. She tells it this way: “A few years ago a local Lutheran church gifted House for All Sinners and Saints a full set of used paraments. My church is like every other church’s little sister so we get a lot of hand me downs. As a group of us went through these beautiful altar cloths we came finally to the red set and found one with an image of a descending dove with completely crazy eyes and claws that looked like talons. Yep. It was as though the Holy Spirit was a raptor. “Man, someone said. We can’t use this one it makes The Holy Spirit look dangerous.” That was some completely sound advice.”<sup>1</sup>

The Holy Spirit looked dangerous. One of the things I love about the Pentecost story is it shows us the dangerous side of the Holy Spirit. I don’t mean dangerous in the sense that it brings us harm or hurts us in some way. I mean dangerous in the sense that the movement of the Holy Spirit can be completely disruptive and even scary if we are willing to let her fill us with her presence and let go of our own preconceived ideas of how things are supposed to be. Our scripture this morning tells a story of Jesus’ followers a few weeks after the resurrection and mere days after the physical presence of Jesus left the earth. They are gathered in a house when the undeniable presence of the Holy Spirit rushes into the room. The text describes it as a sound like the rush of a violent wind that filled the whole house. For many years, when I read this text about the disciples being gathered in a room on Pentecost, I had assumed that they were hiding in the room for fear of persecution. Quite a few scholars interpret the text this way as well. Unlike the story in Acts, the Gospel of John explicitly says that they had locked themselves in the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2012/05/the-pentecost-sermon-i-preached-at-the-festival-of-homiletics/>

room out of fear. They had every reason to be afraid. Their rabbi had just been executed by the Roman state and the religious authorities of the day were no doubt keeping a close eye on the followers of Jesus. But the text doesn't actually state that they were afraid or that they were hiding. The disciples may have simply been waiting for the spirit to come as Jesus had indicated.

They were discerning God's call for them in this new time. I have no doubt that they were nervous and likely a bit fearful about the future and uncertain about their role in it. But once they were filled with the spirit of God, they were inspired to bust out of the safety of the room and preach to anyone and everyone about the wonders of God and the message of Jesus. The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost transformed the disciples. Throughout the gospels this group of people always seemed to struggle to understand Jesus' message. And yet on Pentecost and in the years to follow, this group of ordinary, confused, faithful, and spirit-filled disciples spoke and lived with such faith, such fervor, that they changed the world.

The Holy Spirit transforms us, changes us, and challenges us. It isn't that God's spirit makes us do things we can't do, but gives us courage and strength, so we can be the people God made us to be. Just take Peter for one example. On the eve of Jesus' crucifixion, Peter wouldn't even admit to knowing Jesus. Three times he is given the opportunity to admit to being a follower of Jesus and three times he says "nope, not me." And then, Pentecost happens. Peter is completely transformed. No longer afraid of what might happen to him, Peter is the one who speaks up to the skeptics who propose the disciples are not filled with the Holy Spirit, but are merely drunk. Peter not only speaks up, defending the disciples, he then begins to preach.

Sometimes I think that since we don't tend to experience the Holy Spirit in the same manner as those first followers of Jesus gathered in Jerusalem – with sounds like the rush of a violent wind or visions of tongues of fire - we don't recognize the work and presence of the Holy Spirit. Instead we explain things away as coincidence

or gut feelings, or simply our own brilliance and capability. It is more likely that our experiences of the Holy Spirit show up as a pull to do something meaningful even when it's difficult or uncomfortable. I think a lot about how the Holy Spirit might be pulling our church. As I read one of the UCC Daily Devotionals this week, something spoke to me.

The Rev. Dr. Emily Heath titled the devotional "Learning New Languages."<sup>2</sup> In the scripture, we read that the disciples emerged speaking in such a way that everyone heard them speaking their native tongue. People from Rome and Libya, Egypt and Mesopotamia, all understood what the disciples were saying. Rev. Heath reminds us that the disciples didn't suddenly learn to speak all of these languages, but rather the Holy Spirit gave them the ability. "I'm all for learning other languages," Rev. Heath writes, "but this story isn't about taking Mandarin lessons or immersing ourselves in Finnish. Instead, I think this is about learning to speak in ways that are relevant to the people around us." As I have said in many sermons before, each scripture text contains many truths. This is one of the truths that I am hearing in our text this morning. How might the Holy Spirit be leading us to speak new "languages?" There are so many languages that other churches refuse to speak – the language of science, the language of lgbt equality, the language of social media, the language of mental health, the language of recovery, the language of children, the language of doubters and skeptics. You get the idea. A recent study was released by the Pew Research Center that found 88 percent of Evangelical Christians believe in miracles, but only 28 percent believe human activity is causing climate change.<sup>3</sup> As the President pledges to remove the United States from the Paris Climate Agreement and join the ranks of only two other countries – Nicaragua and Syria, it is numbers like this that help us understand why his supporters think

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.ucc.org/daily\\_devotional\\_learning\\_new\\_languages](http://www.ucc.org/daily_devotional_learning_new_languages)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/commentary/2017/06/02/conservative-evangelicals-worry-climate-change-god>

this is a great idea. The UCC, along with many other mainline denominations released statements denouncing the President's action. The UCC statement was titled "An Opportunity for Which the Church was Born."<sup>4</sup> The statement includes this sentence: "This historic moment provides Christian communities with a powerful opportunity to bear witness to the sacredness of God's creation and the urgent call to preserve it. This is our chance to be the church." In other words, are we ready to speak loud the language of science and creation care?

This afternoon, we are going to try to speak the language of bikers. Motorcyclists primarily but also bicyclists and skateboards, scooter riders and more. We will leave the comfort of our building and take the message literally to the street. This church has the potential to speak the many different languages of those who might be thirsting for the church's message of God's divine love and grace, of Jesus' embodiment of God's desire for justice and liberation, and the dangerous, transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Each one of us may be gifted with the power to speak a different language and it is our job as a community to empower and equip those voices to be heard. But this is no safe or easy task. Sometimes the Holy Spirit can be dangerous. Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber writes that the disciples "were in danger but not from outsiders – the danger they were in, as they sat all together in one place, was from a God who is about to crash the party and bring in everyone they were trying to avoid." That's the thing about God and the Holy Spirit. They rarely operate on our terms. They push us and challenge us to stretch outside our comfort zone so that especially those who feel most strange to us are the ones God pushes us to embrace. Are you ready for that kind of Holy transformation?

I'll close with this quote from Annie Dillard who writes, "Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.ucc.org/news\\_ucc\\_leadership\\_an\\_opportunity\\_for\\_which\\_the\\_church\\_was\\_born\\_06022017](http://www.ucc.org/news_ucc_leadership_an_opportunity_for_which_the_church_was_born_06022017)

chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews."<sup>5</sup>

Jesus didn't promise his followers that following his path would be easy or comfortable. But he did promise it would change their lives. May we be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit - the gentle spirit who descends like a dove and the fiery spirit who shakes us up, calls us to action, and inspires us to be forever transformed. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/april/35.31.html>