

## The Untamable Spirit

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Acts 2:1-21, 43-47

May 23, 2010: Pentecost Sunday

“David” looks like the image I now have in my mind of the unrestrained Old Testament prophet Jeremiah. He wears a floor-length white clerical robe, a long red vest with big pockets, and a large pectoral cross on a chain around his neck. He sports dozens of political buttons supporting an array of causes and carries a staff. His hair is wild, and his long beard is braided in the style of Johnny Depp’s Jack Sparrow in *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

David lives on the streets in downtown Asheville, and he’s a regular attendee at Haywood Street Congregation, a new church that meets mid-day on Wednesdays and has formed primarily to serve homeless people. This past Wednesday, my friend Brian, the pastor, invited the congregation to share their images and experiences of the Holy Spirit.

David, who is always ready to be the first to offer a prophetic word, said that the Holy Spirit reminds him of his favorite story from childhood. It’s one you may remember—about a group of brothers who cannot see. They come upon an elephant, and they describe to one another what an elephant is. “It’s like a tree,” says the brother who encounters the elephant’s leg. “No,” says the brother at its side, “an elephant is like a wall.” The brother feeling the trunk claims that an elephant is like a snake.

They were all right, of course. An elephant is like all these things. And David is right, as well. The Holy Spirit is hard to describe and more than any of us can take in.

*Spirit—Ruah* in Hebrew—is a feminine word. The Holy Spirit is considered among some scholars and disciples to be the female dimension of God. Perhaps that’s why she’s the most neglected member of the Holy Trinity—marginalized in church history, along with women’s stories. Or maybe it’s because she seems so slippery and indefinable. At any rate, she makes only rare appearances in Scripture.

But tonight she has the starring role. She roars into the room where the followers of Jesus are gathered, appearing as wind and fire, stirring up the crowd into a frenzy of language, to the point that onlookers believe that this must be some alcohol-induced spasm of utterance. Drunkenness at nine o’clock in the morning. But this is the baptism by the Holy Spirit that Jesus had promised before he vanished from earth—the Spirit at her wildest, bringing the church to birth.

It is in another birth narrative that she first appears in the Gospels, visiting Mary and playing a key role in the conception of Jesus. She arrives next in the form of a dove, alighting on Jesus at his baptism. And then as the one who leads, or drives, Jesus into the wilderness, depending on which Gospel you read. In Luke, Jesus describes the Holy Spirit as a Teacher who will provide the words to say when his followers are publicly questioned, or tried, or persecuted for their faith. In John, he calls the Spirit the Advocate, or Helper, who will remain as a comforting presence after Jesus is gone. Parent, midwife, dove, leader, driver, teacher, advocate, helper, comforter—the Holy Spirit is busy and imbued with mystery, far too slippery for us to easily grasp.

Probably my favorite statement about her appears not in the Gospels, but in the twenty-sixth verse of the eighth chapter of the Letter to the Romans: “The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.”

I had proof of this mysterious truth two weeks ago. I was facilitating a retreat for Baptist clergywomen at Sabbath House near Bryson City. In that group was Amy Mears, the co-pastor of Glendale Baptist Church in Nashville, Tennessee. You may remember that this Circle sent a card of comfort and support to her family in mid-February after a terrible tragedy. Amy had stayed at church to take care of things after their Ash Wednesday service, while her husband drove their four children home. On their way, a deer ran in front of their van, and the impact immediately killed seven-year-old Emmy.

At the retreat, we watched a slideshow on Amy’s laptop of dear, exuberant, loving Emmy. Amy’s vulnerability around her grief opened the door for other women to share theirs. Sarah’s husband had recently walked out on her and their three children. Melissa had suffered two miscarriages. Others shared the stresses and burdens and loneliness of their lives and their ministries.

It had been a while since I’d been in a room that overflowed with so much pain. At a certain point, there was nothing more that could be said. Tears and silent prayers washed over us. Sighs too deep for words. And the comforting presence of the Holy Spirit.

A week later, I went to see our friend Wiley Dobbs on death row in Georgia. Since my last time there, the warden has done away with contact visits, claiming that visitors were bringing in cell phones and illegal drugs. For several months, in typically sensitive style, Wiley had discouraged those of us who visit him from coming, recognizing how long the trip is and realizing that the circumstances would be more difficult for us than in the past. But conditions on the row have become increasingly grim, the isolation more intense, and May 11<sup>th</sup> was Wiley's birthday.

We had to try to communicate between two layers of tight mesh, with a gap of several inches between them. It was impossible to see each other clearly. As the visiting area filled up, and the noise level rose, I found that I could just barely hear Wiley if I put my ear up to the mesh and he shouted from the other side. This was exhausting to both of us.

Without having to say it, we both knew that this visit would be shorter than all the others we've shared. As I got ready to leave, Wiley thanked me for coming. "I knew you would," he said to me, "even before I got your letter telling me. In twelve years, you've never missed my birthday." We exchanged fewer words than we ever have, but the ones we did were more precious in their scarcity. And ultimately, we didn't need the words. Sighs too deep.

I think of the Holy Spirit as the glue that fills up the gaps; that enabled Wiley and me to bridge the distance; that enables Amy to respond when you ask her how she's coping, "I still get up every morning. That's something." A comforting presence to fill up the emptiness when nothing else can help.



The lectionary passage for tonight from the second chapter of Acts ends with the twenty-first verse, after Peter's speech in which he quotes the prophet Joel. He reminds his hearers that the Spirit will cause young and old, female and male, enslaved and free, to dream dreams and see visions. Notice the great equality here. The Spirit anoints *all* flesh. Sons and daughters—the young—will prophesy. Old men too will have dreams. Even slaves—considered the lowest of the low in society—even they, both women and men, receive the gift. *Everyone* receives this Spirit.

Despite what the lectionary suggests, I think it's impossible to preach the opening verses of this Pentecost chapter without also preaching the closing ones. Because out of that great equality, something extraordinary happens. At the end of the chapter, we find this description: "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at homes and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day God added to their number those who were being saved."

Hmmm. Doesn't sound like good, old, competitive, everybody-take-care-of-yourself capitalism to me. Somebody who was there that Pentecost probably came out with a bumper sticker for chariots and donkey carts, that said, "I didn't vote for socialism."

What happened after the coming of the Holy Spirit is truly amazing. The believers didn't sit down with a blueprint to figure out how they wanted to live, how they were going to structure their social and economic life. The Spirit came, and people were anointed, and they responded. They simply shared their resources, and bread, and took care of one another—gladly and generously—making sure everyone got what they needed.

They were being Christians. Living like a family. Being the church. They were living so counter to the assumptions of that culture that people noticed, and were drawn to them, in vast numbers. They had something going that people wanted to be part of.

### ***Disparities and inequities among the believers became unbearable after the Spirit came.***

Disparities and inequities among them became unbearable after the Spirit came. She rushed as wind into a room where the followers were gathered, ushered in with tongues of fire. It was wind that didn't tear down but built up; that didn't destroy or divide, but brought people together; that unified them in understanding. It was fire that didn't scorch or burn down, but ignited hearts with passion and clarity and courage. The wind and fire of the Holy Spirit, which threw wide open the doors of fear, invited people into new spiritual understandings and economic arrangements. The people received that Spirit and began to share, refusing to claim that anything they owned was their own, but that all was God's for the good of the whole church.

What if we began to believe that we're called to live like the Spirit-anointed Body of Christ; like a family? What if we decided to make a commitment that no one will go hungry? What if Christians began to believe that we're all connected and that we belong to one another? What transformation the world would undergo if we took that principle as our guide!

Those Spirit-anointed members of the early Jerusalem church have a message for us this Pentecost: Our only true security can be found in our faithful connection with others, within a commitment that the needs of all will be met. Their life depended on trusting God and one another. They invite us to give all that we have—and all that we are—to God, who demands nothing less. And they remind us of the truth that, as we give all to God, the abundance that will return to us will be beyond measure.

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We cannot capture or tame the wild Spirit that has been unleashed among us. We can only dream dreams and go along for the ride, letting her take us where she will. Parent, midwife, leader, driver, teacher, advocate, helper, comforter—she will never let us go. She promises to rush in and take up residence wherever hearts are open to receive her.

Amen.