

Pentecost Sunday, May 23, 2021

“The Wild Goose of Pentecost”

Based on Acts 2:1-21

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First Christian Church

Murray, KY 42071



The Wild Goose,” © 2013 Hilary Ann Golden

Great Spirit, Wild Goose of the Almighty.

Be my eye in dark places;

Be my flight in trapped places;

Be my host in wild places;

Be my brood in barren places;

Be my formation in the lost places.

*(Ray Simpson, “A Holy Island Prayer Book: Prayers and Readings from Lindesfarne,
Church Publishing Inc., 2002)*

On many Wednesday evenings during the pandemic a group of us have gathered both from Murray and other places including the Canadian border, Nashville, and Boston to reflect on a poem and scripture. We use a method called “lectio divina” where we are asked to listen for a word[s] or phrase[s] that speaks to us. As I read today’s lectionary passage from Acts 2:1-21 that tells the story of Pentecost I would like to ask you what word or phrase might have stood out for you.

Acts 2:1-18 (NRSV) The Coming of the Holy Spirit

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² 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. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites [Ee-luh-mites], and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia [Cappado-shee-uh], Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia [Fri-jee-uh and Pam-fill-ee-uh], Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³ But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

*¹⁷ ‘In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.*

*¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.*

What words or phrases stood out for you? Here is my list: **suddenly, rush of violent wind, fire, bewildered, astonished, amazed, perplexed, what does this mean?** I bring these words with me as I invite you to go and peek in on Jesus' disciples, who, for ten long days, have been sitting in a house in Jerusalem down the street from the Temple, waiting for an appearance of something called the Holy Spirit. Fifty days earlier their world had been turned upside down when their beloved rabbi Jesus had been put to death on a cross as a common criminal, placed in a closed tomb, but then had miraculously been raised from the dead, appearing first to Mary Magdalene and then the others. For the next forty days he was with them, talking, walking, grilling and eating fish, encouraging them, getting them ready for the day that he would leave them and return to his father who art in heaven, hallowed by thy Name ... Ten days prior Jesus had asked them to walk with him to the Mount of Olives, located between Jerusalem and the village of Bethany. After telling them that they were to be his witnesses to all ends of the earth, he said that they were to go and wait in Jerusalem for the gift of the Holy Spirit. After saying these words and blessing them, he was whooshed up into the clouds, an act we call the Ascension. While they were still looking up, two men dressed in white (angels?) appeared to them and told them to stop looking up into the heavens but to focus on the here and now on earth. They were to do what Jesus told them and return immediately to Jerusalem where they were to wait. (Acts 1:7-11)

We can only imagine how shocked they must have been. To the original twelve disciples (now Judas has been replaced by Matthias), over 100 other disciples have been added to their group. We find ourselves sitting with 120 people who have followed Jesus' instructions and are waiting, waiting, waiting for something called the Holy Spirit. They surely discussed what Jesus meant by the Holy Spirit. His earliest disciples may have talked about Jesus' inaugural sermon in his hometown of Nazareth where he opened the scroll in the synagogue and read from the prophet Isaiah:

*¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,*

*to let the oppressed go free,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” (Lk 4:18-19)*

Would the Holy Spirit enable them to do those things, they wondered? Some of them remembered the Pharisee Nicodemus coming to Jesus secretly at night and asking him how a person could be born again. Jesus told Nicodemus: ***“What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”*** (Jn 3:6-8) Would the Holy Spirit come like wind whose sound they could hear but whose origin they could not locate? And did not Jesus tell them in that same upper room at the last supper that: ***“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth ...*** (John 14:16-17).

Perhaps it was while they were reminiscing about what Jesus had told them about the Holy Spirit that things started to get really loud outside on the streets of Jerusalem. Perhaps they no longer could even hear themselves talk because of the noise of the crowds of pilgrims, which included Jews, Gentiles, and Arabs, who were swarming into Jerusalem. We remember the long list in today's scripture from places so difficult to pronounce as they arrived from Mesopotamia, Asia, Egypt, Libya, Rome, Greece and more. Just think of the mixture of nationalities, cultures, languages, races, customs, religions all merging on the streets of Jerusalem. They had come for the agricultural festival of Shavuot, or the “Feast of Weeks,” to celebrate the giving of the Law to Moses at Sinai.

And then, if it wasn't already noisy enough, quite suddenly, without any kind of weather warning siren, something like a tornado arrived. Walls shook, windows, and doors rattled, things were lifted up into the air. A strong wind that seemed to come from all directions swept through the building in which they were gathered. Simultaneously something gripped them as first one, then another, then the whole group were filled with something powerful. Almost like a dry Santa Ana wind bursting into a full-fledged fire, the Holy Spirit swept into that room becoming something like a wildfire, raging out of control. And then something amazing, astonishing, bewildering, perplexing happened. This group of people, whose mother tongue was Aramaic, suddenly started speaking many other languages they had not known before, which were the languages that those in the crowds of pilgrims from other places spoke. It looked like tongues of fire were resting on each of them. They rushed, exuberant, out into the street, meeting up and mingling

with the crowds, who heard their own languages being spoken. People were amazed, astonished, bewildered, perplexed.

“What does this mean?” everyone wondered. Are you familiar with the saying “two Jews, three opinions”? There was the group who sneered, saying that obviously the disciples were as drunk as skunks. Completely intoxicated as they had begun celebrating early in the morning. Then there likely was a group of Jewish teachers and scribes who went immediately to the synagogue, got out their scrolls and turned to the Torah, rocking back and forth, arguing with each other. They began discussing the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1-9 about the time when their ancestors only spoke one language. After they began to build a high tower in an attempt to reach God in heaven, God responded by scattering them around the world and dividing them into different language groups so that they would not be able to understand each other’s speech or communicate anymore (Genesis 11:6-9). “Yes, that’s how we should understand what is going on in the streets right now with all those different languages being spoken,” they said. “The reversal of Babel!” Then, having satisfied their intellect, they closed the windows and doors of the synagogue to keep the noise of the crowds out as they resumed their study.

But a third group, numbering some 3,000 people, opened up not just their minds but also their hearts as they listened to Peter’s sermon about God pouring out God’s Spirit on people, with sons and daughters being able to prophesy, the young seeing visions, and the elderly dreaming dreams. In a highly flammable position, suddenly they too were swept away by the gusty and wild winds of the Holy Spirit. Our scriptures say that: ***“So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*** (Acts 2:41-42)

When the Holy Spirit arrived on that day, in something that felt like the swirling of wild winds, the church woke up! It is known as the church’s birthday. The disciples experienced the presence of God and Jesus through the gift of the Holy Spirit and were then empowered to spread the Good News to all ends of the earth as they had the ability to break down previous barriers of language, nationality, culture, religion, gender, political persuasion, and so much more.

In Christian theology we talk about God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. The Trinity. The third person of the Trinity is also referred to as the Holy Ghost. The Roman Church (which we come from) used the dove to symbolize the Holy Spirit. That’s likely because a dove descended on Jesus when he was baptized

so we superimpose this image of the dove on the day of Pentecost. Sweet Holy Spirit, we say. The dove is gentle, soothing, peaceful, tranquil, comforting. But does the image of a peaceful dove go along with these words we find in the story of Pentecost: suddenly, rush of violent wind, fire, bewildered, astonished, amazed, perplexed, what does this mean? And does God always come into our world as a gentle comfortable presence? Or does God sometimes stir things up, challenging, convicting, stretching and asking us to do difficult things as we are pushed out of our comfort zones? Perhaps that is why the ancient Celtic Christians from Great Britain and Ireland, whom we studied over Lent, symbolized the Holy Spirit not as a peaceful dove but rather as an undomesticated wild goose.

How many of you have had experiences with geese? I remember in middle school when we lived outside Toronto my mother would drive my siblings and me over to Lake Ontario for canoe lessons. We often would encounter a gaggle of wild geese. Unlike the calming cooing of doves, we would hear the loud unrelenting honking of the geese. They seemed totally out of control as they ran all over the place like wild children on too much sugar who had just been let out for recess after having to sit all morning in the classroom. Sometimes they lashed out at us. This could be quite frightening. They could not be controlled or tamed. They were unruly and impossible to catch (even though we tried). That's why we use the language "wild goose chase." That's an apt phrase for Pentecost as we reimagine it not as us trying to chase the goose but rather the goose (as God's Holy Spirit) trying to catch us! God chases us down in the hope that the Holy Spirit that was breathed into each and every one of us at birth might be powerfully rekindled.

Note what the Holy Spirit allowed the disciples to do: they were enabled to speak so that others could understand. Many in the crowd were enabled to hear. Speaking / hearing: communication. The breaking down of the kinds of divisions that have plagued human beings since the Tower of Babel. Oh, how we need genuine communication in our world today! Did it occur to any of you when you heard this scripture that it takes place near the Temple in the old city of Jerusalem? It was right in this location in early May that the recent violence was sparked between Jews and Palestinians as each had lost the ability to speak and hear in ways that each might understand. On May 10, Hamas in Gaza first fired rockets into Israel, with Israel returning fire. Arab and Jewish Israelis who had learned to live peacefully in neighborhoods together began throwing firebombs at each other's homes. As of Thursday, when they finally agreed to a ceasefire, about 250 people had been killed, including innocent children. That's what happens when people have lost the capacity or willingness to speak in ways that others can hear or refuse to attempt to hear the intentions behind another's words.

That's what happens when people no longer can tune into the voice of the Holy Spirit within that makes communication and healing possible. But this is not just a problem in Israel. In our own divided country people have retreated into their own echo chambers, no longer willing to reach outside their own bubble to those who have different perspectives. The Holy Spirit helps us overcome these divisions if we but allow it to!

There is something else about the image of the wild goose that helps us better to understand how the Holy Spirit can work through us. To get at this, I share another story not from the summer when I'm down on the shore of Lake Ontario being annoyed by the noisy, aggressive gaggle of bossy geese but rather from the late fall when it's now way too cold to go canoeing. I and my friends are walking along the shore and we hear a honking noise high up in the air. We look up and see that same gaggle of wild geese, who previously had run wild, gracefully flying in a v-shaped formation on their way from Canada to spend the winter down south. We see one goose in the front center leading with all the other in two lines behind. Working together as a group, there is a divine synchronicity to their movement as, held up by the air and wind, they can reach their destination more quickly. The flapping of each goose's wings creates an airlift that supports the goose behind it, who supports the goose behind it, and so forth. As a group they expend only about the same amount of energy as one goose flying alone would.



Remember that on Pentecost the Holy Spirit came over people not only as individuals but as a group. Together they were able to accomplish so much more than individuals who attempted to do God's work all on their own. So let us not just as individuals but as a whole congregation pray to receive and open ourselves up to the transformative wild winds of the Holy Spirit, as we join together on a wild goose chase, allowing ourselves to be surprised by the results!

Closing Prayer: Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us as individuals and as a congregation, enabling us to speak so that others might be able to hear and to listen with ears, hearts, and minds wide open so that we might hear and understand what others are intending to say. Remove from us any blocks that prevent us from hearing your Holy Spirit deep within us as we go off on a wild goose chase, doing our part in building Your Kingdom here on earth. Amen.