

Encounters with the Holy Spirit

Although we do not often associate the Holy Spirit with Genesis—the Hebrew indicates that in the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth there was a wind from God which swept over the face of the waters. The Hebrew word is *Ruah* (רוּחַ) while the Greek translates the Hebrew as *Pneuma* (πνεῦμα). The meaning of both words is breath or spirit. In the second creation account it is this same word used to describe how life comes to dwell within this created being. God's activities are often described as being mediated through winds as in the story of Ezekiel's vision in the valley of the dry bones. The wind, breath, spirit of God is what brings life. In the readings selected for us on this Pentecost Sunday we have three different descriptions of the manner in which the Holy Spirit interacts with us. The contexts for these texts vary. They are from three different times in the lives of the disciples. In the gospel of John, the context of the passage is still Jesus' farewell address to the disciples on the night of his betrayal. In John's gospel, the Holy Spirit is mentioned only five times, three of those times are in today's text. In his promise for this future help there is no mention of rushing wind or tongues of fire. Instead, the Spirit in John is identified by two terms that fit into the description of the role the disciples will undertake—that of witness and testimony. The first references are that it is the Spirit of truth who will come from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. The Greek word used is *Paraclete* and is made up of the participial form of the verb meaning to call and the preposition meaning beside. Thus the best understanding of this Spirit of Truth is one that is summoned or called to the side of another. English translations have used comforter, helper, counselor, and advocate which in an arena of judgment would be a helper or legal representative in a trial. Jesus tells the disciples that he is not leaving them alone. This *Paraclete*, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you." The promised Holy Spirit will continue Jesus' teachings and will remind followers when time, grief, fear, or simple human forgetfulness takes those teachings away. Jesus is offering words of assurance to those disciples and by extension to us as well. This Spirit of Truth will expose sin, demonstrate righteousness and provide judgment which will lead Jesus' followers into all the truth of God's reign. The *Paraclete* will enable them to testify to the truth revealed to them about Jesus and about God's redemption offered. The next chronological passage comes from the Book of Acts. This is the description of the arrival of the Holy Spirit in a rushing wind and with tongues of fire. Although all of the gospel accounts refer to the promise that the Holy Spirit will come, in the gospel accounts there is not any prediction of the manner of this arrival. In fact, in John, the Holy Spirit is given to the disciples by Jesus when he breathes upon them just before leading them out to watch his ascension. The Spirit which gives guidance is given by the breathing upon them as life was given to Adam through God's breathing into him. However, the Holy Spirit's arrival on the Day of Pentecost is described by Luke in Acts much more dramatically—and the transformation in the behavior of the disciples is radical. The disciples up until this point have been essentially paralyzed by fear. Not only were they baffled by the strange experiences they have had weeks earlier with the Risen Christ, they were terrified that the authorities might do to them what they had done to Jesus if they didn't lay low and keep quiet. They were reluctant to move into the role Jesus had given to them. Then something which Luke names as the Holy Spirit in the

Book of Acts almost literally explodes into the midst of their fear and timidity. Whatever it was that happened that day obviously lay beyond the boundaries of human language. Luke describes wind and fire, a babble of languages and disciples who look drunk at nine in the morning. There are no easy words for whatever happened—because the truth is that when the Spirit which is God’s movement in the world is present—it is always beyond the capacity of words. But what we can say is that Spirit’s presence changed everything in that room and everything about the people in it. We often focus on the foreign languages spoken and understood or those tongues of fire which appeared, but the real wonder of that event is that all of a sudden, those timid, huddled, frightened people are transformed—transformed into daring, courageous risk-takers. Peter, who on the night Jesus was arrested, denies even knowing him three separate times, is now standing in the public square and preaching away—witnessing to Jesus’ message, the resurrection and proclaiming judgment on those who have denied Jesus’ message while calling them to repentance and faith. The arrival of the Holy Spirit did not eliminate the risk involved in this endeavor. Two chapters further in the Book of Acts, Peter is arrested for the first time. At his appearance before the Council, Peter offers his testimony and when threatened, Peter answered that he could not stop speaking this truth about what he has witness. This boldness of witness is not the only transformation which the Holy Spirit’s movement causes among these disciples. Their understanding of the extent of God’s claim upon peoples beyond and across boundaries undergoes radical changes as the Spirit continues in radical ways—ways resembling the boundaries which Jesus crossed in his life and ministry—going to the outcast, those declared unclean or sinners, those of different ethnic groupings. This movement of the Holy Spirit is not comforting to those whose boundaries are being enlarged or whose barriers are being broken down. Yet that is the proclamation made by Scripture about the Holy Spirit. Following the Holy Spirit which is the Spirit of truth to embody faithful discipleship is not risk-free. That was not the promise given. The promise was that we would not be alone, but would be taught how to live according to God’s ways. When we celebrate Pentecost today we affirm that the Spirit promised by Jesus is now present among his followers and in the world. The third text was written by the Apostle Paul to the Roman community of faith. Although it was written before any of the gospel accounts or the Book of Acts, it refers to an understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of a Christian community which formed later. In this text, Paul refers to the fruits of the Spirit, to the hope which is not seen but which allows them to wait patiently. Paul and the early believers did not envision a long wait for Christ’s return but as time passed, waiting for the return and living in the way of Jesus was a struggle. The fruits of the Spirit’s presence which Paul lists in other letters are love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, patience, and self-control. Those in the community of faith where the Spirit dwells seem to be still struggling with these attributes as Paul phrases it—groaning in labor pains. These are fruits of the Spirit which we also still find difficult to embody at all times. But Paul encourages the community with this: Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with signs too deep for words. And God who searches the heart, knows what is in the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. John Calvin summed up the role of the Holy Spirit as being the bringer of faith through illuminating the mind with the knowledge of God and God’s ways, through the sealing of that knowledge into the heart giving compassion and understanding of what God asks of us,

and providing the faith to live and continue in those ways. Through the Holy Spirit's indwelling we can know and live according to the teachings of our Lord, but we can also know that when we falter on the path, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us. Thanks be to God.