

THE POWER AND CLOSENESS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

It's a fairly common notion that the Holy Spirit, the third member of the Trinity, is a gracious, softly nudging, nurturing spirit who leads her followers with a gentle hand. (By the way, in case you're wondering, I use the pronoun "her" because the Greek word for spirit, *pneuma*, is feminine.)

Some of our Scriptural references to the Holy Spirit support that notion of gentleness. For example, in Matthew's Gospel, immediately after Jesus was baptized we read that, ". . . he went up out of the water; and at that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him."

Notice that the dove-like spirit of God didn't dive-bomb Jesus in a kamikaze-like fashion; she descended lightly, like a feather or a balloon that has lost helium. And the Spirit didn't land on Jesus abruptly, with a sudden jolt; she set down softly on him. Doves are gentle birds. They don't screech and caw like ravens; they coo softly, almost like a cat purring. Doves don't have sharp talons that can rip you apart like eagles and hawks. A dove's claws aren't for hunting, but just for holding on, for perching.

This biblical association of the Holy Spirit with a dove that we're familiar with through the story of Jesus' baptism is probably a major reason why a lot of Christians have this perception in their minds that the Holy Spirit herself is meek and gentle. But I wonder if that sugar-coated understanding of the Holy Spirit prevents us from being bolder in our believing.

What if the Spirit of God is, well, much more powerful than that? What if the Holy Spirit is dove-like only some of the time, and for the rest of the time the Spirit is more of a shover, a muscle-bulging weight lifter whose power we aren't able to contain and whose influence we dare not question?

That image of a very powerful Holy Spirit also has Scriptural backing. In fact, in Mark's Gospel, the very same dove-like Spirit who gently descended and landed on Jesus' shoulder grew a lot more aggressive and forceful after Jesus was baptized. The Spirit had something in mind for Jesus—a test she insisted that Jesus had to go through—and the Spirit wasn't going to take "no" for an answer. This is how Mark's Gospel describes it:

“And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.”

“. . . the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness.” It propelled, shoved, forced Jesus to go there and face temptation, maybe even against Jesus’ will. This wasn’t an invitation or a nudge the Spirit was giving to Jesus; it was a demand, a requirement. And that tells us the Holy Spirit is far from meek and gentle.

In the book *Things Seen and Unseen: A Year Lived in Faith* by Nora Gallagher, the Holy Spirit was described in an unusual and vivid way, as though the Spirit just stepped out of a Saturday matinee Western movie: “The third member of the Trinity arrives without warning and . . . moves in to stay like a little old lady who wades into a barroom brawl, shooting her six-guns into the air.”

How’s that for an image? The Spirit of God crashing through the door of our lives, guns blazing, shouting at us, “Boys and girls, there’s a new sheriff in town!” The wonderful thing about a potent, forceful Holy Spirit is that, just when we’re about ready to give up on believing that God is at work in us or in the world, that Spirit can burst into our lives and show us her power.

And that’s the kind of Holy Spirit we read about in the Book of Acts, suddenly appearing in glory and might on this day we call Pentecost: “When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.”

Wind and fire; both of them powerful elements in the world that are often out of our control. That’s what Luke used to describe the Holy Spirit. And remember, we’re not talking about some light, pleasant breeze or a matchstick-sized flame, either.

The wind was violent. That is to say, hurricane or tornado force winds. The kind of winds that turn over cars and carry away trailer park homes. That’s the power of the Holy Spirit. And as for the tongues of flame. We all know how powerful fire is, right?

I remember one night a number of years ago, before Penny and I moved away so I could go to seminary, we were living in South Portland at the time, and we stopped to watch as the South Portland Fire Department demolished a house by burning it down. The fire fighters were using the house for a practice drill to learn how to control fires. There was a small explosion, and in a matter of moments the house was

fully engulfed. Flames shot high into the air, and big, red-hot cinders began dancing around in the sky, carried by the wind. Some of those cinders floated onto nearby tree branches and threatened to set them on fire. Others settled dangerously close to nearby homes, which had to be hosed down with water to prevent them from igniting.

After about an hour or so the flames had been pretty much extinguished. But I vividly remember the expressions of concern and relief on some of the fire fighters' faces, which told me the fire had come perilously close to getting out of control. But fire is like that. Once it reaches a certain level of combustion, all you can really do is let it burn and try to prevent some of the things around it from also catching on fire.

That's how I envision the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God is like a raging fire in that, once God sparks the flame, she becomes a tremendously powerful force that's hard to control or stop. The only thing we can do is let the divine fire burn on, knowing that God is the only fire fighter who is able to control the flames. But, frighteningly, God's intent isn't to extinguish the fire, but to allow it to burn on for as long as necessary until the Spirit accomplishes the work she was supposed to do.

The ironic thing is, God wants us to get burned by this spiritual fire. God wants our hearts to be set aflame by the Spirit's power. And it would be a great blessing if a cinder or two of God's Holy Spirit landed in our hearts and ignited our lives with the presence, power and love of God.

The thing about the Holy Spirit, my friends, is that she's so darned surprising and unpredictable. We just don't know when the Spirit of God is going to show up or what she's going to do when she makes an appearance in our lives. Sometimes the Spirit intends to blow us away with a violent, hurricane-force wind. And other times the Spirit simply wants to comfort us and offer assurance in times of trouble and pain that God is very near to us.

Rev. Mary Halvorson, pastor of the Grace University Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, shared an experience she had of the Holy Spirit's sudden, surprising, reassuring intrusion into her life. She wrote:

A few years ago I attended a memorial service at an inner-city church in the heart of Minneapolis. I didn't know any of the people who had died. There were no family connections for me. I wasn't acquainted with any of the fifty or so people who had gathered for the service. But we were all there together, friends and strangers alike, for the same purpose: to remember the homeless who had died that year while living on the city's streets.

The church was cold and dark. My eyes were drawn to the altar area, which was filled with candles. Next to each candle was a name plate and a

carnation. Some of the name plates had first and last names etched on them; others only had first names; and many of the name plates were blank, representing those whose names were unknown.

The service began with prayer and song, then the lighting of the candles. As each candle was lit, if there was a name, it was read, and a bell was rung. I found myself deeply moved hearing the names of people I never knew, but perhaps had passed them on the street. I imagined their lives filled with sad, complicated, and unfair stories. These were real, flesh and blood people with feelings, needs, hopes and dreams, not unlike my own. But for whatever reason, their lives took a different turn and they ended up living under a bridge, over a gutter, or on a doorstep.

After all the candles were lit, we took in the powerful force of their light, reminding us of the multitude of homeless persons on the streets that very night. Silence followed. It seemed the only appropriate and caring way to respond. In the silence I prayed for forgiveness for my failure to provide community and care to these persons.

Then, suddenly and unexpectedly, from out of the silence, from the back of the darkened church and coming directly over our heads, a bird flew. It flew right over the candles toward the altar, up into the corner, and it was gone. I was frozen in awe. My heart was so full I could hardly breathe. I wondered, but I also knew, that at that moment God had flown into that space, over those names, as if to bless them. In that bird's winged flight in a church sanctuary, I wondered what the Holy Spirit was saying to us. But I was almost certain that God was saying, "I am here, in the nameless, the voiceless, the weak and the forgotten. I am here in your midst. See me. Know me. Do not forget me. Do not forsake me."

I looked around for verification of this theophany. Did anyone else see what I saw? It seemed as if no one else had seen the bird except for one other: a man, a homeless man, who sat in the pew across from me. His stocking hat was tattered, his coat poked with holes, his body dirty and without sleep. Our eyes met. His toothless grin, as wide as the Mississippi, told me that he also had an epiphany; his eyes were huge with wonder and total delight. He looked at me as if to say, "I saw God, too."

I felt as if I was on holy ground. I drove home in tears. In that simple service, God's Spirit burst in on the scene, as if to say, "I am embodied here. See me. Recognize me in these poor." I have to admit, Mary Halvorson concluded, that "part of me was afraid. Can God really be this close? Does God actually show up? And if God actually does, what does this mean for me, O pastor of such waning faith? Is it possible that God could show up in my ministry, in this

congregation, in this life, in this pain, in this moment, at this table with its bread and cup, in this Scripture passage read and reread over the centuries? Does God really come this close to us, in the power of fire and wind, and in the power of a small feathered bird flying over me?”

Maybe those are questions we might ask ourselves, as well.

My dear friends, we need God’s Holy Spirit, the rouser and igniter of our ministries as Christians. This church we’re part of needs the power of God’s Holy Spirit, blowing through its life, knocking over any walls that are dividing us, and burning down the chaff that is preventing us from thriving and growing. We need a powerful, brash, fully engaged Holy Spirit who sometimes encourages us, but oftentimes does what is necessary by pushing, poking and shoving us forward, whether we want to go or not.

With such a powerful, forceful Spirit in our midst, we don’t need to be afraid or timid in our faith. Because with the presence of God’s Spirit, we can jump, or even fall, and God will catch us. We can risk, and we can even fail, and God is there for us. We can run until we collapse in exhaustion, and God will be there to lift us up and refresh us, as near to us as the air we breathe, the wind that rustles the leaves, or the rays of light that shine on us because of the raging fire of the sun that is always burning.

I once heard that one of the popes of history, I don’t know which one, used to pray every night before retiring, “Dear God, the church is yours, so you take charge now. I’m tired and I’m going to bed.”

That prayer reflects trust in the power of God’s Spirit, and confidence that God’s Spirit is always close by. It’s a prayer that stems from the faith that the Holy Spirit is always and ever moving in our midst and won’t let us down. At the heart of that prayer is the belief that the God who loves us with a steadfast and eternal love, and whom we love in response, shows up in our lives and in the world all the time, if we have eyes of faith to see. In that sense, every day God is pouring out God’s Spirit on us; and therefore, every day is a new Pentecost, pregnant with hope and expectation.

The world is God’s. The Holy Spirit is at work. And God is in control. Knowing and believing that can help us sleep at night, don’t you think?

Thanks be to God. Amen.