

Squamish United Church  
Rev. Karen Millard  
Pentecost - Shared with St. John's

May 20, 2018

### Scriptures

Acts 2:1-21

Romans 8:22-27

John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

### **Pentecost Spirit**

I've been taking a course in Seattle since October. A small co-hort of us are working on "Leadership in the New Parish." We are discovering the intersection of our story, the story of our place, and the story of God; while we develop a holistic approach for reimagining church as a vibrant member of the community; and discerning a contextual plan for engagement within our unique parish (township and region).

Last month when I was in Seattle our class was walking towards our next learning sight and we began to have a conversation about some of the strengths of different staff members or people in our congregation. My friend Michelle a United Church of Canada minister in Victoria shared how her children and family person loves to participate in the work of worship and how for pentecost this year she wants to devise a pulley system that when used will have flames dancing just above peoples heads. Wow I said I just use streamers, I've put fans behind the pulpit so it blows the flames and people can experience the presence of wind. But I'm pretty low key I guess. "Oh," piped up our friend Jessica who is a pastor in the Vineyard tradition. she said "as a charismatic we would just pray for the spirit to come we wouldn't try to create it ourselves." BOOM! Michelle and I had to pick our jaws up off the concrete. "Right" we said and then Michelle said "But if I did that the spirit might actually come and that would freak my people right out!" We laughed and laughed but Michelle and I could not let go of the twinge of shame we both felt for being so very intellectual and distant in the way we create our worship and liturgy. I can guarantee Michelle will use this story in her sermon today also. Why? Because it hit us both hard. Poor Jessica was just being honest, she didn't have an ounce of malice in her statement. She wasn't judging she was just stating the obvious and we realized she was right. Why don't we pray for the presence of the spirit - I mean really pray in a way that shows we believe she exists. Maybe because we don't actually believe?

If I am honest I sometimes wish I could have the kind of faith my mom does - where she just say's "Pray about it" and she believes it will happen. I do sometimes miss the trusting faith I had in my more evangelical days. My little secret for you to know is I have had moments where I have felt the movement of the spirit. I actually even have a story of healing - I used to be close to bedridden with my bad back after a terrible bicycle accident. I know that the spirit is alive and present but sometimes in my intellectual mind with my knowledge of the darkness of the world I forget it is not up to me to create it. I believe in the spirit, in fact it is my favourite image of God.

My daughter is named Wind because I love the image of the Wind of the spirit so much. I used to dream of buying a sail boat and if I did I would name her Ruach which is the Hebrew for wind of the spirit. As a sailor I know the power and the beauty and the danger of the wind. And so the image of the spirit arriving as a powerful wind would be life changing enough but in this instance there was so much more.

Fredrick Blechner writes “FIRE HAS NO SHAPE OR SUBSTANCE. You can't taste it or smell it or hear it. You can't touch it except at great risk. You can't weigh it or measure it or examine it with instruments. You can never grasp it in its fullness because it never stands still. Yet there is no mistaking its extraordinary power... A pillar of fire was what led the children of Israel through the wilderness, and it was from a burning bush that God first spoke to Moses. There were tongues of fire leaping up from the disciples on the day of Pentecost... In the pages of Scripture, fire is holiness, and perhaps never more hauntingly than in the little charcoal fire that Jesus of Nazareth, newly risen from the dead, kindles for cooking his friends' breakfast on the beach at daybreak.<sup>1</sup>

The wind and the fire come into a room of people feeling lost, wondering what to do, wondering if their story is over and if God is indeed dead. But the Advocate, the Paraclete, the companion that Jesus had promised descended that day and “All of a sudden, they understood! The scared disciples become courageous proclaimers, the hesitant and doubt filled ones now bold and assured, the Aramaic speaking ones, now heard in all possible tongues. What happened? Jesus had promised from the very beginning that he would leave but that he would not leave the disciples alone. Again, and again, he told them that he would die and leave them, but the disciples did not believe. In fact, often they responded in despondency and anger. "Stop talking about that!" They would say. But soon, the unthinkable happened and they all, in their own way, go back to life as before. The memories of their life with Jesus becoming like a fairy tale, sadness settled in because they missed their friend. Disappointment settled in because, for a moment, it seemed that all was lost. Then he appears, like he said he would! He again walks with them and talks with them, he reminds them that they are to carry on the work that he had begun, that although he had to leave, he would not leave them alone, he would send his Spirit. As he was lifted into the heaven, he tells them to go back to Jerusalem and wait there...”<sup>2</sup>

The Rev. Juan Carlos Huertas wrote “I can only imagine the excitement mixed with apprehension as the followers of Jesus gathered in that upper room. This time they could not go back to life as usual. They had not just witnessed their friend, teacher, and Lord die, but now they had experienced his resurrection. They had touched his wounds, seen him enter into locked rooms, and disappear into thin air. They had been reminded of their mission, to continue the work that Jesus had begun. To continue healing, exorcising demons, restoring, forgiving, peace-making, loving. As they went about their work, they were to remind those around them that the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2018/4/16/fire?rq=Fire>

<sup>2</sup> [http://day1.org/8200-juan\\_carlos\\_huertas\\_understood](http://day1.org/8200-juan_carlos_huertas_understood) - changed tense

kingdom of God was visiting them, the shalom of God, the wholeness and completeness of God taking form right before their eyes.

Just thinking about it overwhelms me. I can imagine this upper room gathering in our congregation. We are supposed to do what? How are we supposed to do what Jesus did? There is no way that we can continue this work!”<sup>3</sup>

There is a reason the biblical stories and images resonate for us, because so often they tell our current story from a different time. I was speaking with a mentor and friend the other day and I shared with him that I have decided to stay in Squamish just a little bit longer for a variety of reasons. I reminded him that he had said to me when we began the Centrepoint project that as soon as it was completed it would be time to get out. He said well I’m not saying that it happened to you but normally when a congregation goes through a project like this even though the vision from the start has been new mission and ministry when they move back in the building they just want everything to be exactly the same as it was before but they are too tired to do it so they just expect it to magically happen and the leadership sits back and waits for the paid staff to just do it. He reiterated “I’m not saying that has happened to you.” Here is the hard part of the story because I laughed a little and said “Oh that is exactly what happened.” Somehow though I think we are blessed because we have a new trajectory and new leaders and dreams that are catching the spirit. Some have remembered what our dreams and visions and purposes were when we started this place.

Rev Heurtas continues “Yes, it would be easier to just be good. To settle for the tame, safe, and average doings of religious life. The rhythms of occasional church attendance, a Bible study here or there, an occasional check in the offering, and a service project once a year. We can do that, that is achievable. After all, it is the language that we know.

Jesus had other things in mind!

His life, death, and resurrection showed us that we could become more, we could be agents of God's language, not just to those that we know, that look like us, live like us, and behave like us, not just to those that speak our language, but instead to all of humanity.

This language, the language of redemption, new life, forgiveness and reconciliation, peace, and love is a universal language that opens the pathways for all of creation to live into the fullness of God, right here, right now.

True that we, left to our own devices, are unable to "do this." We cannot just learn this language on our own through the latest app. We too need a comforter, one that comes and empowers us to be about God's work in ways unimaginable. We, too, need Jesus with us always. That is the only way that we'll be able to continue his work.

And so, on this Pentecost Sunday, I pray that we are waiting ... waiting for the promised Spirit. Can you hear it? You can't miss it. According to the story of our faith, it came loud, obvious, and difference-making. It came howling, breath-taking, and on fire!”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> IBID

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(Added in a personal piece about the Royal Wedding Sermon being an example of a Spirit presence taking opportunity to speak to the world).

In this day and age and in our traditions we are taught to be controlled in our belief and our compassion. We are taught to not interfere with others lives and yet the very spirit of God calls us to engage to follow our hearts, our beliefs our passions.

“The unexplainable happened, as the wind blew, as the pneuma of God came into the upper room, flames of fire rested on the disciple's heads. They could not see their own, but they could see them in each other. The flames resting, making home - the flames hot, searing, marking the disciples as bearers of the beloved community of Jesus. Making them able to proclaim the message to anyone that would hear!

Soon the ones who gathered were transported outside. The proclamation of Jesus heard among the crowds gathered. These were not your everyday crowds, the crowds represented humanity across time and space. From all corners of the earth, all known languages, faithful ones beyond the cultural center of Jerusalem. The God of Israel reminding all that gathered that they too belonged, that the message of Jesus was for them also.”

I recall Nick beginning his pentecost sermon last year with something about not believing in the Spirit. I've learn that Nick says things like that just to get people going but I have to say I'm quite the opposite. I long for the presence, knowledge, feeling, activity of the spirit. It scares me a little - okay maybe a lot to say that because if we really engage and listen to the spirit of God we will likely be called to express more compassion, grace and love than we believe is humanly possible but that is what faith is all about. Death of the old way and resurrection to new life.

Now, lets be honest like my friend Michelle said if we prayed for the Spirit in this place and it actually arrived most of you would be so freaked out you might leave and never come back. I don't know entirely why God designed us in such a way that some of us have profound spiritual, emotional experiences of the spirit and others of us have tugs on our hearts but what I do know is that God is always present and tugging and longing for us to bring love and light to this broken world.

I posted this L.R. Knost quote on our facebook page this week. It says “Do not be dismayed by the brokenness of the world. All things break. And all things can be mended. Not with time, as they say, but with intention. So go. Love intentionally, extravagantly, unconditionally. The broken world waits in darkness for the light that is you.” I believe that is entirely the message of Pentecost. The spirit arrives so that we might go forth and be the love and the light to this broken world. The spirit arrives so that when we are in the midst of those dark broken times we might know we are never alone. The spirit arrives so that we might have life abundant and experience the grace and peace of the holy in such a way that we go forth and share that grace and peace with all the world.

Amen.