

THE HOLY SPIRIT

**A sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
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The Bible paints some wild pictures of the working of the Holy Spirit. In the second chapter of the book of Acts, it's described like a strong rushing wind: [Quote] "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 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... All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."ⁱ In today's gospel lesson,ⁱⁱ Jesus says, "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."ⁱⁱⁱ As was described in today's reading from the Hebrew scriptures,^{iv} when Isaiah is commissioned by God as a prophet, he sees God seated on a throne, high and exalted. Then, the temple in Jerusalem, where he's worshipping,^v fills with smoke. Seraphs are flying all around, crying out in loud voices that shake the doorposts of the temple: "Holy, Holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."^{vi}

What do these apparently "mystical" kinds of experience mean to us today? Where is the Holy Spirit in our lives? A Russian graduate student in engineering named Peter has explained to me that he grew up as an atheist and thought religion was completely unintelligible. His parents never went to church in Moscow and claimed that God didn't exist, much less a Trinity that included the Holy Spirit. In school he was told that science gives all the answers. But then when Peter was sixteen, his parents took him for a boat trip along the Volga River, and there he

had a life-changing experience. On the third night he was sitting out under the stars on the upper deck. Everything was very quiet, except for the gentle slapping of small waves against the bow. For at least an hour he sat alone, deeply breathing in the night air and feeling a slight chill that made his spine tingle. Hills he describes as "very boring," with nothing growing on them, were slowly slipping by as the boat moved upstream. He kept staring at them, lost in thought. As he breathed rhythmically and felt the breeze on his skin, suddenly, as he puts it, he lost all personal boundaries and merged into the hills. He had a very clear sense that he and those hills were made of the same stuff. He began saying to himself, "We're both part of each other. There's no essential difference between myself and nature, even inanimate nature. It would be quite natural for me now to go to those hills, lie down with them and become one with them." Peter isn't sure how long this feeling lasted -- maybe only a few minutes. All he knows now is that it was a very powerful event.

These days he describes what happened as a mystical experience. When he came back to everyday reality, his rational mind saw that the whole world has a logic behind it that's manifested equally in nature and in human beings. As a young atheist scientist, he would have cited Einstein: $e=mc^2$. But Peter came to call it God. He saw it as a kind of energy or spirit that includes everything within it from the hills to the stars to himself to the boat he was travelling on. From that night on, religion in the form of the Holy Spirit was no longer unintelligible to him.

The next step was music. He heard an organ playing Bach -- the St. Matthew Passion music in particular. He wanted to learn how to play the organ, because, as he put it, the wind that passed through those instrumental pipes surrounded him, massaged him, and overwhelmed him with what he called a "great, transcendental, eternal quality." He saw organ music as music

of the spheres – a dialogue between humans and God. Through this heavenly music he felt people were being pushed to embrace and devote themselves to the ultimate beauty and power that is God, rather than simply to their minuscule selves. At the age of seventeen, Peter joined an organ class in Moscow. He spent more than five years at it and became a rather accomplished performer by the time he became a graduate student in engineering. Bach is still his favorite.

Personally, I love organ music too, and I'm very grateful for the work Robert Huw Morgan does as our university organist. Another art form that's powerful for me in evincing the Holy Spirit, though, is the romantic poetry of nineteenth century England. It helps me feel air, wind, breath... present everywhere around me, blowing against my skin, moving in and out of my lungs: that which sustains my very life, not to mention moving over my vocal chords and allowing me to recite poetry in the first place.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge writes of "The Eolian Harp," which can be placed in a window casement and played naturally by the movement of the wind: "And that simplest Lute, Placed length-ways in the clasping casement, hark! How by the desultory breeze caressed ... O! The one life within us and abroad, Which meets all motion and becomes its soul ... And what if all of animated nature Be but organic harps diversely framed, That tremble into thought, as o'er them seeps Plastic and vast, one intellectual Breeze, At once the Soul of each, and the God of all?"^{vii} It's in an attempt to be moved as Coleridge that I have a set of wind chimes in my back yard here on campus.

Shelley describes the divine nature of the wind even as it blows cold in England: "O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being, Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing... Wild Spirit, which art moving every where; Destroyer and preserver; hear, O, hear! ... Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is: What

if my leaves are falling like its own! The tumult of thy mighty harmonies Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone, Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, spirit fierce, My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one! Drive my dead thoughts over the universe Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth! ... O wind, if Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?"^{viii}

William Wordsworth picks up the trail in the spring with his Poem "To My Sister," connecting wind to love: "There is a blessing in the air, which seems a sense of joy to yield To the bare trees, and mountains bare, And grass in the green field... Love, now a universal birth, from heart to heart is stealing, From earth to man, from man to earth: -- It is the hour of feeling. One moment now may give us more Than years of toiling reason: Our minds shall drink at very pore the spirit of the season... And from the blessed power that rolls About, below, above, We'll frame the measure of our souls: They shall be tuned to love."^{ix}

I spent five years in a group of activist ministers which called itself the Holy Spirit Group. Every two weeks we'd retreat from the social engagement of our public ministries for bible study, prayer, and mutual support in our own spiritual development. I really liked the name Holy Spirit Group. As we sat in meditative silence for the first fifteen or twenty minutes of each meeting, it was always the wind outside of the windows that I heard first and that seemed to represent the presence of God. Soon the sound of that wind outside would seem to rush inside, filling the room and merging with my own breath inside my body -- the rhythmic in-and-out of air through my nostrils -- upon which my life depended and which seemed to represent the divine presence within.

The dual outside-inside imagery always reminded me of what many religious traditions have referred to as the transcendent God and the immanent God, that is the infinite God of the universe and the God deep within my own being: my soul. In Hinduism the outer and inner God

are expressed as the brahman and the atman -- in Sanskrit literally "expansiveness" and "breath."^x Hindu scriptures tell us they are ultimately the same God, the one God, the Om. That most sacred monosyllable of Hinduism, om, then becomes the seed of all mantras which are chanted -- using the breath again -- in Hindu meditation and prayer. In our group we used to repetitively chant Taize songs from the Christian community by that name, founded in France in 1940.

There's more to the concept of the Holy Spirit, though, than just appreciation of nature and of one breeze that blows through it all, as Wordsworth intimated when describing it as tuned to love. The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh also seems to understand this: "The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove, penetrated Him deeply, and He revealed the manifestation of the Holy Spirit. Jesus [then] healed whatever He touched with the Holy Spirit in Him; he transformed many people... When you touch deep understanding and love, you are healed."^{xi}

After Jesus experienced the Holy Spirit descending upon him from the air at the time of his baptism, he spent forty days in the wilderness before returning to his home synagogue in Nazareth. There in that sanctuary he spoke for the first time in his ministry, explaining what it meant to have the Holy Spirit upon him, quoting from the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of God 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."^{xii} To be filled with the Holy Spirit is not to remain in a mystical, meditative trance. It's then to go out and engage in social action to eradicate poverty and liberate the oppressed.

Later in the gospel of John,^{xiii} Jesus explains that even though he's leaving his disciples, the Holy Spirit will be with them always to inspire them and to guide them in action. The Greek word used in this passage is paraclete, which means "one who is called to the side of."^{xiv} It's my

perspective that the Holy Spirit is always at our side, like the air that surrounds us, if only we can recognize that it's there. It's the one part of the Christian Trinity with which we often seem to be least familiar while at the same time it's the most present to us. We're living in the Spirit. It's also within us, as surely as we breathe in and out. It manifests itself in nature, and it manifests itself in human love. I believe that to be spiritual at its best means not only to glorify God and to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. It also means to be deeply aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit. And then by consciously living in the Spirit, we may truly live in the fullness of life.

AMEN.

NOTES

ⁱ Acts 2:1-2,4.

ⁱⁱ John 3: 1-17.

ⁱⁱⁱ John 3: 7-8.

^{iv} Isaiah 6: 1-8.

^v *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2001), Vol. VI, p. 102,

^{vi} Isaiah 6: 3.

^{vii} Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Eolian Harp," *The College Survey of English Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1942), Vol. 2, p. 75.

^{viii} Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Ode to the West Wind," *College Survey*, pp. 271-272.

^{ix} William Wordsworth, "To My Sister," *College Survey*, p. 51.

^x Jonathan Z. Smith, Harper's Dictionary of Religion (HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), pp. 88, 126.

^{xi} Thich Nhat Hanh [original source misplaced, but see for similar sense), *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), p. 145.

^{xii} Luke 4: 18.

^{xiii} John 16:5-15.

^{xiv} Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1982), Vol. 3, p. 654.