

## **What's the Holy Spirit up to?**

Acts 2:1-11

A Sermon for Pentecost Sunday

Today is a festival Sunday, Pentecost, when we celebrate the Holy Spirit who descends like the rush of a mighty wind and with tongues of fire.

A month ago, the ELCA Church Council elected a new executive for administration; her name is Rachel Wind. The press release about her election quotes her saying: "I am humbled by the opportunity to step into this position at this moment in the life of the church. The Holy Spirit is up to something, and I'm grateful to be part of it."

Her statement is a fun play on words and disconcerting, too. It's a play on words because of her last name: "Wind." In both Hebrew and in Greek the word for "wind" and "spirit" is the same. Here she, whose name is "Wind," speaks humbly (yet proudly) of how the "Spirit" is up to something, and she is a part of it.

And it's also disconcerting because she seems unsure of what the Spirit is up to. It's like the uncertain bugle of 1 Corinthians 14:8: "If the bugle gives an uncertain sound, who will follow (get ready for battle)?"

Nevertheless, she raises a good question: How do you know what the Holy Spirit is up to? Are you automatically part of the Spirit's work if you're a church official?

That's a precarious claim because the Spirit is also known to depart from people and places. You may recall that King Saul did not follow the Lord. It says in Samuel 16:14: "The Spirit of the Lord departed from him," and the Lord repented for having made him king.

There's a warning.

John 3:1-15 tells the story about Nicodemus, and John 3:8 says: "The wind blows where it will, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so, it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

There is a word play going on here in John about how the wind comes and goes. It can be quite calm one minute, then huge gusts of wind come the next. The wind can shift unexpectedly, coming from the West, and then swirling around and coming from the East.

When someone says: The Holy Spirit is calling us to do this or that, how do you know it's true or not? How do you know something is of "the Holy Spirit" and not some other spirit? After all, we are told to test the spirits.

1 John 4:1 states: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world."

And what is involved in this testing we are supposed to do? How do you test something that blows where it wills, when it wills?

1 John 4:2 says: "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God."

What is at stake here is that the Spirit is about pointing to him, the one who was truly both God and man. We wonder about that. Was he truly one of us? When he stubbed his toe, did it hurt? Or not?

Or remember when someone touched the hem of his garment, and he asked: "Who touched me?" If he was God, if he was all-knowing, wouldn't he know?

Or where it says he was tired and he slept. If he was all-powerful, how could he be tired? At the end at his crucifixion, it says he was betrayed. How could that be if he knew what was in the hearts of everybody? Or a little later, he sweat blood and prayed: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But he was God and knew that in a few hours he would be resurrected.

At the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D, the church made the very basic decision that in terms of God being human and divine, Jesus is "unmixed and undivided," and stop there! Do not go speculating about how. Otherwise, you are caught by speculation about matters that are God's business, not ours.

Nevertheless, the basic point is made: God came in the flesh, including dying. Why is that important? In 1 John 4:10 he became the sacrifice, the one who took care of sin and death. As it says in 1 John 2:2: "He became the expiation." He became the one who changed everything. He became like us so he could deal with this.

The Book of Hebrews says he was like us in every way, except sin: "He had to be made like his brethren in every respect" (2:17) and 4:15: "For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with us in our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." He suffered; he died. He was sorrowful. He was involved in all the change and decay of life, and by doing that he made all the difference. He came in the flesh and he died, and this is not just an interesting idea.

He was raised and thus he is no longer limited by time and space; he is truly present in every time and place where his Word is proclaimed. He is present to forgive.

The Gospel of John helps us get a handle on this, particularly chapters 14-16. John 14:26 and John 15:26 say the same thing about the Holy Spirit. And then the same thing is said again in John 16:13-14. In all three places it says the Holy Spirit has one job, that is, to re-

present Christ. The Holy Spirit is about bringing Christ to us and to others, to the whole world.

On Pentecost we celebrate the descent of the Holy Spirit, who, like wind and fire, jumps cultures and circumstances.

Our text in Acts 2 has three verses with a long list of places, cities, and countries with names that are tricky to pronounce and mostly unknown to us. This is a description of people throughout the Roman Empire through whom the Word, like wind and fire, spread. And from there to Asia Minor, across North Africa, Greece, Ethiopia, Rome and north to what is now Europe. Then to China in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century. Even today, though Islam is on the rise, even in Iran, there are underground churches through which Christ himself comes to forgive, redeem, and give hope.

Yes, "the Holy Spirit is up to something," but the Holy Spirit is not a spirit of novelty, not about new causes, new agendas. Remember, the Holy Spirit also departs from places and persons who fall away and follow other spirits.

Luther writes in his explanation to the Third Article of the Creed: "The Holy Spirit is the one who calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies me, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one truth faith."

The Holy Spirit is doing it, both positively and negatively, throughout church history.

Paul writes in Romans 10:14: "How are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent?" And then in Romans 10:17: "Faith comes by hearing and hearing comes by the preaching of Christ."

He has taken care of sin, death, and devil, and pointing to him is what the Holy Spirit is about. As John 15:26 says: "But when the Counselor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me; and you also are witnesses."

That's what the Holy Spirit is about, and that's our mission, too.

Amen