

Meditation

What does it look like, this 'settling of the Spirit?' What does it sound like - smell like - feel like, for the modern reader - for you of St John's Presbyterian - for a faithful seeker in a world that includes COVID and conflict and space-stations and human-built technology on MARS?

From that day when 'all were gathered in one place' to now, much has changed even though much remains the same. We are still longing to know God's comfort and consolation. We continue to struggle with Jesus' invitation to 'follow,' knowing only that following Jesus takes us out of our considerable comfort zones. What's changed is the way we understand the workings of the universe - the way we relate to ideas and information about the divine (the super-natural) nature of the world around us. We are less likely to trust in the idea of 'miracle'; more inclined to find an answer than we are to rejoice in the mystery of some unknown thing. And as for 'the feast of Pentecost...'

In Jewish observance, Pentecost is a harvest festival. A festival that falls fifty days after Passover; a time to celebrate the wheat harvest and the 'giving of the Law' to Moses on Sinai. A significant milestone in the Jewish calendar of festivals - offerings of first fruits are made and celebrated - so of course there's a crowd in the city. And of course, there are many nationalities represented. Of course, the friends of Jesus have to answer questions about their activities. We should expect anything less?

That the spirit makes a public statement during a harvest festival - that the Spirit gets a public re-imagining as part of the celebration of 'first fruits' is surely no accident. It is only unfortunate that (according to Acts chapter 2) Peter uses Joel to help explain what's happening.

Joel draws attention to 'the last days,' and invites people to choose 'or else'...when in truth, the Spirit is about new things. A bad reputation persists, when people think about what it means to be blessed by the spirit - to be caught up in the spirit - an unfortunate correspondence with those who would use misunderstood phenomena (like speaking in tongues, for example) as the principal measure of the Spirit at work. The 'spirit-filled' church is (unfortunately) caricatured as impulsive - frivolous - without structure.

Spirit filled people and spirit led worship don't have to be those things, but the impression is a persistent one. (Does the Spirit use printed prayers or scripted sermons? It's an old debate summarized in the story about the preacher who was urged by one of their listeners to abandon the script and 'listen for the Spirit' one Sunday. The preacher took up the challenge, and was met at the door by the enthusiastic member who said, 'did it work? Did you hear the Spirit? What did the Spirit say?' To which the paperless preacher answered - "I heard the Spirit alright - asking me why I had not prepared my remarks for this morning's service!")

Truth is, the Spirit speaks to (and through) those who study - those who agonize - those who wait in holy patience. This seems to be the model from Acts that we know so well – Jesus' friends are blessed by this gift of God as they wait and wonder about Jesus' final instructions.

The festival becomes the jumping off point for a new understanding about the ministry of Jesus, and a new way to engage in the work of God...

But I prefer Ezekiel's experience.

"In the Spirit,' Ezekiel is shown a miserable, lonely valley that simply reeks of death. A living metaphor is what comes next. The Lord asks questions whose answers are assured (given the circumstances)

Yes, the 'bones' are beyond help - and yes, by some miracle of divine excellence, they will stand and be renewed - re-fleshed - repaired for service to that same divine excellence. And Ezekiel is told that this metaphor is meant for the whole of God's people. They may seem bereft - without hope - without anything that resembles life - but they remain God's people, and God has not - will not - does not abandon those whom God has claimed.

Up from the dust they stand (these bones) a vast multitude...brought to life by a word from God. Changed from nothing to something by the breath that God offers (ruach / pneuma / spirit). Prophecy to the breath (says the Lord) and at the prophet's call, the spirit changes things. Rather than imagining the spirit as some free-wheeling entity that 'blows where it will,' Ezekiel is introduced to the Spirit (wind/breath) that 'comes when it's called,' and that's an altogether different (and more compelling) notion of how God might work.

That any one of us - in our desperation for justice, or in the agony of anticipation - might cry out for the intervention of the Spirit and be rewarded by new life revealed in old, dry bones. This is a hopeful thing - a gospel thing.

And what it 'looks like' is not just fire or bones brought to life, or chattering in unknown tongues. This particular sign of the ever-present God is more wonderful and more diverse than we've been led to believe. What the Spirit offers is as broad and wide as it has always been

It is the Spirit who guides us through our most difficult challenges. It is the Spirit that answers our prayers – even (especially) those prayers without words that speak of our deepest pain; our sharpest grief. The Spirit leads us to the life-giving word; to the waters of baptism; to the bread and the wine. The Spirit makes our worship more than the sum of its parts. The Spirit transforms our bread and wine. It is the Spirit that frees our imaginations to see through the impossible, and helps us recognize God at work, and see Jesus in our midst.

All this is part of the mystery of faith – a mystery that draws us closer to God and one another.