

WATCH OUT FOR THE HOLY SPIRIT!

Sometimes I wonder if we, the Christian church, have managed to defang or emasculate the Holy Spirit. It seems to me that our conception of the Holy Spirit is almost exclusively that of a sleepy, gentle breeze blowing through the air so lightly that we barely even notice it. Many of our Pentecost hymns have bought into this idea, and make God's Spirit seem like a benign, non-threatening force that has so little effect in the world or on our lives, it can easily and safely be ignored. For example:

“Breathe on me, breath of God, fill me with life anew; that I may love what thou dost love, and do what thou wouldst do.”

Or: “Spirit of God, descend upon my heart; warm it with hope, through all its pulses move; stoop to my weaknesses, mighty as thou art, and make me love thee as I ought to love.”

And: “Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me; Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me. Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.”

Compare those polite, well-mannered descriptions of God's Spirit with Luke's account in the Book of Acts: “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.”

A violent, hurricane-force wind. Tongues of fire. Wind and fire are two of the most powerful forces on earth. Both of them have the capacity to upend, disturb and take down anything in their path. And that's how God's Holy Spirit made her appearance and introduced herself to the disciples on the first Pentecost. So maybe a hymn should be written about the Spirit that goes something like: “Blow me down, storm of God, let your gale wind gust through; force me to live and love and learn, the things that you want me to.”

Be honest. Is that the kind of Pentecost moment you want to experience? Could your mind and your life really take such a radical divine disruption? Or do you prefer that God's Spirit come like a gentle breeze rather than a raging tornado?

In the book *The Road Less Traveled* by M. Scott Peck, there's a story about a wealthy hermit named Ted, who lived alone in a small cabin in the woods for seven years. He saw and spoke to almost no one, except Dr. Peck, his therapist. Ted's days were occupied with carpentry, fishing, and making meals.

It sounds pleasant and relaxing, doesn't it? But Ted had no enthusiasm about life. He was totally apathetic about everything. And when it came to faith, he wasn't just unenthusiastic and apathetic; he was actively hostile. He particularly resisted and resented Christianity.

As a young boy, Ted was a passionate Christian. But in college a number of things in his life went south and soured his attitude. He fell in love with a woman who rejected him. And later, a close friend was killed in a random, senseless car accident. So he denounced his faith, and years later he still blamed God for those tragedies. "It was God's fault. God rejected me."

In Florida, during a hurricane—and I'll never understand why so many people do such a foolish thing—Ted went out on a pier during the height of the storm. But in his case it was apparently a suicidal impulse that caused him to do it. Well, as you might have predicted, a huge wave washed over the dock and knocked him into the water. In Ted's words:

"I felt it slam into me, felt myself being swept away, and felt myself lost in the water. There was nothing I could do to save myself. I was certain I was going to die. I was terrified. After about a minute I was tossed backward by the water . . . and a second later I was slammed down against the concrete of the pier. I crawled to the side of the pier, gripped it, and hand over hand I crawled back to the land. I was a bit bruised. That was all."

Ted almost lost his life, nearly threw it away; but it was returned to him in an extraordinary way. Some would probably even call it a miracle. But not Ted. He saw it as merely luck. Good fortune. But Dr. Peck, his counselor, challenged him. He said, "It's interesting, Ted . . . that whenever something very painful happens to you, you rail against God and complain about what a terrible world it is. But when something good happens to you, you guess you're lucky. A minor tragedy, and it's God's fault. A miraculous blessing, and it's a bit lucky."

After this confrontation with his therapist, Ted looked more closely at his life—all of it, the good and the bad, the hard as well as the easy. And after several years he not only returned to the faith, he felt called to become an ordained pastor. In seminary he began calling himself "Theodore," rather than "Ted." To those who asked him why, he explained that his full name, "Theodore," literally means, "Lover of God." He didn't mind if the world came to know about the enthusiastic return of his love for God. Theodore was proud to let others know about his allegiance to the Lord who saved him, and

reorient his life in accordance with his rediscovered faith.

It's a pretty remarkable story, isn't it? In the midst of the powerful storm, with its gale force winds and huge, dangerous waves, Ted experienced his own personal Pentecost. With the help of therapy and a lot of self-reflection, he saw the work and presence of God in his life through the raging winds of a hurricane, and once again became a passionate lover of God.

In some ways, of course, Ted's Pentecost was different than the Pentecost we read about in the second chapter of the Book of Acts. He wasn't converted publically, but rather through quiet contemplation about his life when he was by himself. His Pentecost happened largely in private, in places like an isolated pier, a hermit's cabin, and a counseling session. But even so, Ted's Pentecost has close similarities to this morning's New Testament story. Because the Holy Spirit revealed to Ted that he was loved by God. That revelation came after a long period of disappointments and disillusionment, just as the first Pentecost came after times of loss and sorrow for the disciples. And, because of his new enthusiasm, Ted publically declared himself, like the disciples did, to be someone who not only was loved by God, but who loved God, just as his name, "Theodore," said.

In that sense, Ted was also like the early church that, in the face of trials and tribulation, boldly and publically proclaimed their love for God. In fact, those first members of the newly born church, in their fervor to make their love for God known, literally made fools of themselves. They were so enthusiastic that some people who were there and witnessed what had happened mocked the disciples, and accused them of being drunk at nine o'clock in the morning. But I don't think the disciples were waiting for or expecting the kind of Pentecost they experienced.

On the contrary, they didn't know what to expect. They had gone through the bitter disillusionment of Jesus' death on a cross; then, after having all too brief a time with the resurrected Jesus, he ascended and was seemingly gone from them again. They easily could have felt abandoned by God. They could have concluded, as Ted once did, that everything bad that had happened to them was a sign of God's rejection. But instead, the disciples saw signs of God's powerful, loving intervention and presence in what happened to them. When the Holy Spirit came to them in such a forceful, dramatic way, they enthusiastically received that gift of divine revelation and gave witness to God's presence and love.

I wonder how many times we totally miss, or misinterpret, the Pentecostal opportunities God gives us. I wonder how often we let the various chances the Spirit offers us to reorient and redirect our lives slip right through

our fingers. Fortunately, that doesn't have to happen.

I think about all the people I've known and ministered to who, when they were touched by something out of their control like major surgery, a life-threatening illness or a serious accident, saw their life in a very different light. Such experiences moved them to give thanks for each new day of life God gifted them with, and encouraged them to pay closer attention to their families and to God's presence and activity in their lives.

I would call those experiences, as difficult and challenging and painful as they were, Pentecost experiences, because the Holy Spirit abruptly broke into their lives, burned up those turbulent, stormy moments of sickness and sorrow, blew away their despair, and transformed those experiences into divine moments in which the Spirit reassured them that God was present with them.

My friends, there are times, moments and places in our lives where it's easier—not easy, mind you, but easier—to sense and believe in God's presence. Celtic Christians, originating in Ireland, believed there were what they came to call "thin places" in the world, where the veil between heaven and earth was virtually nonexistent and it was much more probable to have an encounter with the Holy Spirit.

Of course, there are also times in our lives when God seems incredibly distant from us, let alone loving toward us. But Pentecost, and the coming of the Holy Spirit, assures us of God's persistent, pursuing presence. Which means we don't need to look and search diligently for those "thin places" here on earth; because with the Holy Spirit, everywhere we are and everything we do has the potential to be a "thin place," where the gulf between heaven and earth is bridged because our loving God willingly chooses to come to us!

So, if you take nothing else from this worship service home with you today to think about, reflect on and rejoice over, I pray you will at least take this with you: Pentecost is God's assurance that you're not alone, and never will be alone. Because, through the Holy Spirit, God has invaded the world; which means God is always here with us, even in the adversities, struggles and disturbances of life. And the Spirit's loving presence frees and empowers us to love and minister to others boldly; or, if not love and minister to them, at least not hurt them.

In one church congregation I read about, they had a moment during every Communion service where they would proclaim together, "In life, in death, and in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God." What they're really saying and declaring is that they're "Pentecost people." Because Pentecost people are always seeking and discovering signs of the Holy Spirit's presence in their lives and in the world.

Those signs might come like a gentle breeze or a warm glow in our hearts. But watch out, because who knows. The Spirit may just choose to come like the roaring winds of a hurricane, or a raging, out of control forest fire. God's Spirit has been known to do that. Amen.