

Declaring the Things That Are to Come
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United Church of Strafford, Vermont
May 28, 2023 Pentecost
Psalm 104; Acts 2: 1-17, 40-47; John 16:13

Welcome: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Day of Pentecost. Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those online. We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. Our congregation has voted to establish a reparations fund for the hardships they have had to endure from colonial times unto this day. We give thanks for the opportunity to share in the bounty of this place and to protect it in the spirit of indigenous wisdom.

Pentecost celebrates all the manifestations of the Holy Spirit among us—every expression of Christ-like love and oneness that we see.

It is also a day of drama. The Bible says, “Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind.... All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages.” Imagine the uproar of it!

When it quieted down, what lasted was a new way of living dedicated to caring for one another and all creation, and being one in the Spirit—living what Bishop Tutu called God’s dream.

So one of the best ways to celebrate Pentecost is to linger after the service and share life together, reaching out with love especially to those we know least well, because the Spirit bridges differences so that we may all be one.

Call to Worship: The Hebrew and Greek words for Spirit in the Bible have the same three meanings. Ruach and Pneuma both mean breath, wind and spirit.

We will hear breath and wind as images for Spirit today, but they are more than metaphors. Our life and the life of the Earth arise from Spirit and depend on breath and wind to survive and thrive.

All that the Holy Spirit requires of us is that we be in a place to acknowledge and receive it. So let us worship together in the faith that the Spirit is here in this place and wants to breathe in us and blow through us into the world.

Children’s Time— Happy Birthday! Today is the birthday of the very first church, and that first church led through two thousand years to every other church and to us here in the United Church of Strafford, so happy birthday!

Today is called Pentecost, a Greek word meaning fiftieth day and it is the Greek name for the Jewish festival Shavuot, which is 50 days after Passover (and Christian Pentecost is fifty days after Easter).

Shavuot celebrates Moses getting the Commandments from God to help guide the people and is also the first harvest celebration of the growing season.

The streets of Jerusalem on Shavuot or Pentecost were filled with Jews from all over the world who spoke different languages. Suddenly in the room where the followers of Jesus were gathered this blast of wind and something like tongues of fire or lightning roared into the room over their heads and the Spirit filled them with love and joy and they started shouting “Praise God!” in languages they did not even know, and out on the street people from all different countries heard their own language being spoken.

This was the beginning of the church, and this is a truth that we need to remember—when the Spirit is moving among us, it makes all of our differences able to be together as one people.

I want to help you feel what it was like that day, and what it is like when we are all different yet one. Of course, most of the time the Spirit speaks very quietly, it can even sound like silence, and sometimes it comes out like the Pachelbel Prelude we heard Lisa play, but sometimes it sounds like this: I would like to invite everyone to shout out praise God as loudly and joyfully as you can, each in whatever language you choose. There are several translations of Praise God printed at the top of the order of worship, and if you know any others, please use the most exotic you can. I am going to get us started and please keep going at the top of your lungs until I give you the signal to stop....

Next time things get chaotic in church, just remember how we began, in that loud, joyful, chaotic uproar! It is just one way that the Spirit works.

And now let us pray together the Lord’s Prayer...

Declaring the Things That Are to Come

Professor Carlos Baker was my advisor in college. He was a graduate of Dartmouth with a Robert Frost kind of feel to him. Carlos Baker was best known as the man Ernest Hemingway chose to be his authorized biographer. His course on Hemingway was always packed.

One day Baker was lecturing in a large gothic hall, when suddenly the two-story tall, leaded glass windows blasted open in a violent gust of wind.

We jumped in our seats, and the huge curtain wafted far out over our heads and then drifted down again. The wind died as quickly as it rose. Baker stopped his lecture, leaned close to the microphone and said in an eerie whisper, “The Spirit of Ernest is among us.”

We laughed, but it was nervous laughter, because it really did feel as if the Spirit of Ernest was with us. Carlos Baker made him come alive, and the curtain floating like a bullfighter’s cape felt true to what the Spirit of Ernest might do.

What if I were to whisper to you, “The Holy Spirit is among us.” Would you believe me, and would it matter if it was true?

The followers of Christ had an easy time believing that the Holy Spirit was among them that Pentecost. The Spirit came with a rush of wind blowing open the windows. They saw something like a curtain of fire overhead. They heard the eerie sound of their own mouths speaking languages they did not know. Something real was happening.

Then Peter felt inspired to stand up and preach. He quoted the Prophet Joel saying, “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.”

As Jesus said in the Gospel of John, “When the Spirit of truth comes, it will guide you...and it will declare to you the things that are to come.”

We know the Spirit by its fruits—individual gifts like insight, intuition, creative inspiration, an expanded vision of oneness, a wider capacity for compassion and love. The Spirit gives guidance, comfort and strength.

There are collective fruits as well, when the Spirit moves through a community of Spirit-focused people. The last portion of today’s reading from Acts says, “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple,

they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Spirit added to their number.”

Just from this one short paragraph we know many things about the Spirit. We know it brings diverse people together as one. It helps us see that the gifts God gives us are meant not for us alone, but to enable us to serve others who are in need. The Spirit is a force available in every moment. The Spirit moves us to have glad and generous hearts and to praise the creator and creation. It inspires an all-inclusive kindness that earns the goodwill of our neighbors. The Spirit promotes the growth of beloved community.

If you saw any of these individual and collective gifts here, you would know I was right when I said the Holy Spirit was among us, even if the windows did not blow open. They would also show why it would matter.

If the Spirit of Ernest Hemingway were among us, it might make a difference. Our sentences might get stark and very short, or run on, our observations hard edged, our claims about the moral universe absolute. We might drink more, fish more. We would write best sellers. That would be good. But would it really matter?

Hemingway wrote a short story, “A Clean, Well Lighted Place.” The most famous passage in it features the Spanish word for nothing. A character in the story says to himself, “Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name thy kingdom nada thy will be nada in nada as it is in nada. Give us this nada our daily nada...”

Hemingway writes, “It was all a nothing and a man was a nothing too. It was only that, and light was all it needed and a certain cleanness and order.”

When the Spirit of Ernest is with us, in the whole vast universe of nothingness he gives us only a clean, well-lighted place to comfort our existential loneliness as we wait to die.

But when the Holy Spirit is among us, new worlds are born out of nada, ex nihil. A lifeless planet gives birth to a living cell. Psalm 104 says, “When you send forth your spirit...you renew the face of the ground.”

The Spirit speaking through a human voice touches hearts, giving us not just a clean, well-lighted place but a vision of the world transformed into God’s realm of peace and lovingkindness and well-being for all. The Spirit’s presence matters more than anything—it is what makes everything else matter in the service of love and life and light!

We are part of the movement of that Spirit flowing through history. We can see how it has moved through the saints of this community, including those whose lives we are honoring in this season of Strafford memorial services. Think how the Spirit moving through people you know has touched and inspired you and others. Think how you have seen the Spirit guide, strengthen and comfort people in times of crisis or loss.

The Spirit has led this congregation over the years to support neighbors in need, and to provide leadership for peace, justice and the care of the earth and its creatures. The Spirit has made this sanctuary a beloved home and this congregation a beloved family.

The Spirit is still declaring the things that are to come, and helping us fulfill them. If we listen we may hear what bold new decisions it is asking us to make as individuals and as a church. So let us pray a listening prayer, listening for the Spirit within the silence...

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

What a gift!

Hummingbirds and a fuschia
red blossoms and wings whirring