

THE SPIRIT: A PRESENCE AND A PLAYER

Sermon for the Opening Eucharist for the 2006 Assembly
Metropolitan Washington, D.C. Synod, ELCA
Saint Andrew's Catholic Church, Roanoke, Virginia
June 8, 2006

LESSONS FOR THE LITURGY¹

Exodus 19:1-9

On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai. {2} They had journeyed from Rephidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain. {3} Then Moses went up to God; the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: {4} You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. {5} **Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, {6} but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.** These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites." {7} So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him. {8} The people all answered as one: "Everything that the LORD has spoken we will do." Moses reported the words of the people to the LORD. {9} Then the LORD said to Moses, "I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after."

Romans 8:14-17, 22-26

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. {15} For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. **When we cry, "Abba! Father!" {16} it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, {17} and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ-- if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.** . . . We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; {23} and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. {24} For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? {25} But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. {26} **Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.**

Saint John 7:27-29

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, {38} and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" {39} Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive.; **for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.**

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In the Name of the Father, and of the Son (+), and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I. The Spirit - A Presence and a Player!

May I ask you a question? Was it I, or were you just a bit stunned too, by the closing verse of this evening's Gospel lesson? Let me explain.

For a number of years this preacher has fallen victim to Pastor Steven Buechler and his assembly worship committee's choice of lessons and occasions for this opening Eucharist. We have celebrated such well-known and celebrated saints and Church fathers as:

Columba, Abbot of Iona, 597,

Basil the Great, Bishop of Caesarea, 379,

Gregory of Nazianzus, Bishop of Constantinople, 389, and

Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa, 385, all champions of the Church!

I thought it was as if the committee was saying with a smirk, "Let's see what the bishop will do with *these* lessons."

But, tonight's Gospel might be the winner! The Gospel lesson is somewhat of a stunner. It goes well and logically, reporting Jesus "living water" invitation in response to the libations of the Feast of the Tabernacles, so well described in the *Mishnah*. But then comes the closing line: "for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified."²

No Spirit? Really? I thought the Trinity, whose Sunday comes in just a few days, was from the beginning. And, how does one read such passages as :

Genesis 1:2 *Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.*

Isaiah 61:1: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor . . . to proclaim liberty to the captives . . .*

Ezekiel 37:1: *The hand of the Lord was upon me and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord, and set me in the middle of a valley: it was filled with dry bones.*

Luke 3:21 - 22 *When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove.*

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Luke 4:1 *Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil . . .*

Clearly, the Spirit has always been a presence and a player, from the very beginning of creation and throughout the epic story of God's relentless work for our salvation.

Perhaps we can forgive the writer of John, however, living in the Pentecostal glow of Luke's story of the pouring out of the Spirit, for thinking of this outpouring as the coming of the Spirit. The alternate translations of this text seem on the right track with the suggestion that, at this point in Jesus' last days before the crucifixion, we should be reading "For at this time, the Spirit had not been poured out upon the Church."

There can be little doubt that, at this "Pentecostal moment" in the life of the apostles . . . and the Church . . . its life, vision, ministry and outreach have all been changed dramatically. Listen again as Luke tells the story:

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. {3} Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. {4} All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. {5} Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. . . . Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? {8} And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?" ³

II. The Spirit – God's Change Agent

It is natural enough that folks focus on the stunning miracle of Galileans speaking in tongues so inclusive that pilgrims and visitors to Jerusalem from every nation could understand the mighty acts of God in his or her own native tongue. No wonder people marveled and wondered aloud.

But, there is yet another stunning miracle in this story. It begins with Peter. In the midst of the confusion, Peter . . . not one known for his courage or his insight after Caesarea Philippi . . . stands up and preaches. It is a bold sermon that confronts the hearers and proclaims the Good News of Jesus, the Christ, whom they crucified and God raised up. It offers God's grace, forgiveness, and salvation. And, throughout the Book of Acts, the Spirit will wrestle with Peter, most memorably at Joppa and in the home of the centurion at Caesarea. The centurion was a Roman, a gentile. The Spirit of rushing wind and tongues of fire changed Peter and all the disciples into apostles! And it kept happening.

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The Word spread, stepping over barriers just as Jesus had implied in his “great commission,” including people of all nations. Philip, known for his powerful preaching, was sent by the Spirit into Gaza and there was encouraged by that same Spirit to approach an Ethiopian official of great importance. As we would say in our day, he was a man “of color.” From Philip’s conversation came the Ethiopian’s confession: “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” There Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch.⁴ The story concludes: “And he (the Ethiopian) went on his way rejoicing!” Moreover, early church tradition tells us that this Ethiopian returned to his country and preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ there.

The Spirit of wind and fire was God’s change agent over and again calling the early Church to live in God’s inclusiveness. It is worth noting that Luke mentions that this important minister in the Ethiopian government was an Ethiopian, which would make him a person of color. He mentions it once! He mentions that he was a eunuch six different times! As such, according to Jewish law, he would not have been able to be a convert, to “enter into the congregation of the Lord.”⁵ All are to be welcome in Christ!

The Spirit of wind and fire, indeed!

III. The Spirit of Wind and Fire – The Pentecostal Church

Just as the Spirit has been a presence and a player in every age, that Spirit must be present in this Church, this synod, . . . gusting freely and powerfully and flaming brightly in the ardor of our people.

Listen to Saint Paul in tonight’s second lesson:

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ--if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

It is this Spirit of wind and of fire that causes our hearts to hunger for God with an intimacy that cries out “Abba!”, which is to say “Daddy!” Not alone does it cause us to reach to God as a beloved Father, this Spirit also helps form our prayers

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

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We Lutherans hold as precious instruction Luther's teaching in this matter of God's gifts to us through the Spirit:

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him; but the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me by His gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in the true faith; in like manner He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth . . .⁶

The Spirit of wind and fire, indeed! We must be a Church in constant prayer for that Spirit.

We must be a Pentecostal Church! (My Lord! I never thought I would hear myself say that about Lutherans!) The "birth of the Church" is always where ever and when ever the Spirit comes down. It is at baptism, to be sure. "Receive the Spirit . . .!" And, at Confirmation we pray for the renewal of the gifts of the Spirit very specifically.

Even so, we are always in the need of renewal. There is a birth and rebirth of the Church when the Spirit's coming evokes and provokes proclamation as a response from the mouths of believers turned disciples.

And, that's the crying need for this Church . . . the power of the Spirit of wind and fire that turns those who say they believe from "believers" to disciples who are ready to proclaim to any and to all the Good News of what it means to be "Living in God's Amazing Grace."

IV. Goals for Our Life Together in the Spirit

The First - A Church in Prayer for the Renewal and Increase of the Gifts of the Spirit

As we hear the story of the Spirit of wind and of fire, we should learn another time of our need to be touched anew. It should be clear that we cannot be the Church without it. We are the Church only when it is the Spirit who has gathered us and it is for the work of the Gospel that we have been gathered.

The Second – A Transformed and Welcoming Church

It is a strategy and goal of this synod to have available a transformed and transforming congregation within convenient distance for every resident in the territory of this synod.⁷ Ambitious? You bet! Attainable? Only by God's grace and the visionary commitment of God's people. With the wind of the Spirit and fire of that Spirit, we can have great confidence.

This involves calling all of our congregations into renewal and transformation into vital

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and mission-oriented ministries with their community and the world, and not alone their congregations, as the arena of the Gospel to which they have been called.

It involves planting new congregations in rapidly growing new neighborhoods and developing multicultural outreach strategies in our changing neighborhoods. Two new mission starts in this synod have been approved for this year by the ELCA's Program Unit for Evangelical Outreach and Congregational Mission in cooperation with our synod's congregations and our Division for Outreach and Global Mission.

This goal involves the carrying forth of a strategy to initiate and assist our smaller congregations in assessing their ministries in the present and the years ahead, and in the search for transformed models and strategies in light of changing neighborhoods, increasing costs, and stable or declining memberships. We are thrilled and pleased that Thrivent for Lutherans has responded with a grant of \$11,000.00 to assist in the cost for initiating these conversations with 26 of our congregations come the Fall of this year, and a second grant request is in preparation.

The Third – Caring for our Rostered Leaders

We have, this very afternoon begun a conversation that will continue through this assembly and beyond regarding appropriate salary compensations for rostered leaders given the cost of living in our area of service, particularly the cost of housing. This is a conversation that is demanded of us as caring members of a faith community on the one hand, and as responsible planners for having needed leadership in this church on the other. It has many implications and impacts that must be considered. Our goal is to have this conversation in caring, and to continue to have it beyond this assembly.

The Fourth – Welcoming Congregations in a Welcoming Synod

For all of our talk about inclusiveness, both in the first century church and in ours, we've over all not done very well with it. Walls yet stand, and if not walls, then "comfortable social distances."

Some of these "social distances" will be topics of resolutions and debates before this assembly. Noise and heat will no doubt appear as work, if not progress, on these topics. But I believe that nothing much will change across this synod and church because of our resolutions, even our adopted policies. Should we have all these things properly in place and agreed upon, there will yet be the matter of being a welcoming Church.

I have come to understand that "welcoming" has at least four important stages or levels. Let me list them and explain briefly:

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Welcome Stage One: The Decision to be An Open and Welcoming Congregation

It has been a struggle for some, but I believe that every one of our congregations, by policy, and virtually all of our people, desire to be open to all: all races, all socio- economic groups, all political viewpoints, all nationalities, all sexual orientations, etc.

Welcome Stage Two: Learning to be Comfortable among Differences

Social comfort with our differences seldom comes with our decisions to be welcoming. To say “Welcome” does not mean that we are saying that we are comfortable with those who are different. Old understandings or misunderstandings, language differences, and cultural differences can be difficult to bridge, making some “social distance” continue to be comfortable, even though we are saying and we mean to say “welcome.”

Welcome Stage Three: Risk Taking Toward Change

Caring enough to reach out to those who differ from us involves some risk taking and determination to move toward change. It means talking with others and taking other actions that move toward active inclusiveness. One would think that this is the third and last step. But, there is one more.

Welcome Stage Four: Helping Others to Believe Us!

As long as we are “risk taking” in our reaching, we are not yet really comfortable and those whom we would welcome can feel it. So, we must not only learn to reach out and step over, we must learn to do so in such ways that folks we would address, invite, and welcome can really believe we want them and are comfortable on the other side of the “divide.” I suppose one could argue that we should not have to do that. But then, if we really want to be inclusive, I suppose we should be expected to do “whatever it takes”!

So, while we have all decided that we truly want and intend to be inclusive, we have a great deal of work to do with our welcoming. Policies and Churchwide statements will not finally do it. It is for each one of us and our congregations.

If the Spirit is a presence and a participant in our calling, we shall need to feel the sound of the Spirit’s rushing wind and feel the fire of this Spirit’s presence.

If we are living in God’s amazing grace, we should also expect to feel the fire of the Spirit and to act with the Spirit’s power, just as we read in the first century accounts.

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V. WITH ONE VOICE AND ONE SONG⁸

The Collect for the Vigil of Pentecost prays: “Look upon your people gathered in prayer, open to receive the Spirit's flame.”

With so much before this synod and the Church, we must be driven to prayer. And in the tradition of generation before us, in such times we are driven to song. Join me in a relatively recent song. It's recent in origin, but has something of the sound of a spiritual. Will you sing it with me?

Spirit of the Living God, Fall fresh on me.
Spirit of the Living God, Fall fresh on me.
Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me,
Spirit of the Living God, Fall fresh on me.

From our African sisters and brothers we have learned a powerful affirmation:

“God is good!”

R. “All the time!”

“All the time!”

R. “God is good!”

AMEN.

ENDNOTES:

1. The lessons chosen for this liturgy are those for the Vigil of Pentecost, Series B. Since this is the week following Pentecost, they were chosen as alternates to the lessons of last Sunday.
2. “as yet there was no Spirit” The NIV translation of this stunning statement is “for up to that time the Spirit had not been given.” It seeks to explain the bluntness of the best of the Greek source texts.
3. Saint Luke 2:1-11.
4. The full story is recorded in Acts 8:26-39.:
5. Deuteronomy 23:1.
6. Luther, Martin, *The Small Catechism*, Explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles Creed. I have quoted it as I first learned it in 1946 at First Lutheran Church at the feet of my pastor, The Rev. J. I. Coiner.

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7. Mission Strategy of the synod's Division for Outreach and Global Missions.

8. From the Collect for the Vigil of Pentecost.

The Collect for the Vigil of Pentecost --

Almighty and ever-living God, you fulfilled the promise of Easter by sending your Holy Spirit to unite the races and nations on earth and thus to proclaim your glory. Look upon your people gathered in prayer, open to receive the Spirit's flame. May it come to rest in our hearts and heal the divisions of word and tongue, that with one voice and one song we may praise your name in joy and thanksgiving; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. AMEN.