

A Sermon by the Reverend Elizabeth Bonforte Gardner  
The Third Sunday after Pentecost (C)  
Sunday, June 30, 2019

*2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14 | Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20*  
*Galatians 5:1, 13-25 | Luke 9:51-62*

Collect:

Almighty God, you have built your Church upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone: Grant that we may be joined together in unity of spirit, that we may be your holy temple.

I rarely do this but I erased the sermon I'd written and decided to switch gears almost entirely.

When I originally read the lessons for today, I felt there was a lot we could tackle together.

For starters, slavery and what it means to be yoked to someone or something.

But I couldn't shake this feeling that God wanted something else.

It made me wonder...

Why am I feeling called to read and reread today's scripture?

Why am I feeling pushed or nudged or even dragged in some other direction?

And all the while I kept hearing two words over and over again: Holy Spirit.

I heard it at an event I attended on Thursday.

It was a wonderful celebration of a Christ Church member beginning a new – very secular – job... but afterwards those who attended were saying, "You could just feel the Holy Spirit in that room."

On Friday I helped lay to rest a Navy Captain at Arlington.

He'd had a remarkable career and was surrounded by his wife of 56 years and three sons – one of whom was a Navy Seal.

And again people were noticing and commenting on, "the Holy Spirit" in the service.

Even when I had a very difficult phone call on Friday, the other person said, "we need to trust it is the Holy Spirit."

But what does that even mean?

Tim said in his sermon at Pentecost that when church people talk about the Holy Spirit it means we probably don't know what is going on.

So I did some research:

The Holy Spirit is first and foremost God's personal presence.<sup>1</sup>

Going back to Genesis, remember the world is a dark, chaotic place and above that hovers God's Spirit.

The Hebrew word is Ruach.

It can be defined in many different ways but what all the definitions have in common is Energy.

Now I was not a science major on purpose.

But we can all understand what they mean.

This energy is invisible but at the same time it is something we feel, we know.

Like wind – that is Ruach.

Or breath – that is Ruach.

For mankind, Ruach is life and it is also reason and will and conscience.

For God, Ruach is creative and restorative and redemptive.

And make no mistake, Ruach is God.

Throughout the Bible we hear about God's spirit giving people life, energy.

An energy that helps us do more or be more or see more.

For Joseph, Ruach helped him find deeper meaning in dreams.

For the prophets, Ruach gave them the ability to see the world as God sees it.

Job talked about Ruach.

And as our collect reminds us, Ruach give the apostles and prophets a way to spread God's word to unify us.

In today's language we might say, "us – only better."

Throughout the Old Testament is the promise that God's spirit, this Ruach, would come to the world again as the Messiah to transform the human heart.

To make the world better.

That is why we hear of Jesus, at the beginning of his ministry, receiving God's spirit resting on him like a bird.

When the religious leaders have Jesus killed, the disciples said it was God's spirit that raised him.

And, as we heard a couple of weeks ago at Pentecost, Jesus gave his followers this same spirit by breathing on them.

But here is the best part!

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<sup>1</sup> The Bible Project, *Who is the Holy Spirit*.

That same spirit is in us.

It is that same spirit we call forth in Baptism.

To change us.

In the church we call that an ontological change.

But that is just a crazy way of saying we've felt the energy.

The breath.

And we aren't the same.

We want to do and be more.

When we see it we use the word "inspired."

It literally means "in the spirit."

It reminds us that each person is gifted in a unique or special way.

Better yet, it acknowledges that this gift or inspiration comes not from us but from God.

God at work in and through us.

Now, we *could* take all the credit for what the Holy Spirit, this Ruach, does.

And undoubtedly we have.

Without even thinking about it.

But every once in a while there is that moment where you recognize that there is something, someone, carrying you or helping you or supporting you – particularly after a time of trouble or struggle.

You feel a shift.

I know this isn't very theological but the image that comes to my mind is when Mary Poppins arrives and leaves.

In my own life it is much more subtle than a strange woman at my home coming by umbrella with a carpet bag of everything we could ever need.

But if I'm very lucky, I notice it.

In my life it is more like a door cracking or window opening where once I saw only a wall.

You know what I mean...

It can happen in relationships.

It can happen in meetings.

It can happen in large organizations.

It can happen around the dinner table.

But you can feel the difference.

The secular word for it is “breakthrough.”

In the church we say it is the Holy Spirit.

And when it happens, there is a noticeable shift.

Now, in my experience I can’t force that door or window.

Don’t get me wrong, I try.

Usually at my own peril.

I believe I can make it happen and if Jesus wants to come along for the ride, well He is welcome but probably not needed.

In fact, when I decide to live without the Holy Spirit guiding me I end up like most of the congregations who got one of Paul’s letters.

Listen to this modern translation of today’s passage from Paul’s letter to the Galatians:

It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: intimacy that isn’t intimate at all; a terrible accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on.

But... when I make space for the Holy Spirit in my life then things change.

There is a shift.

Here is the same translation for the rest of Paul’s letter.

But what happens when we live God’s way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.

If you say you are a follower of Jesus, the choice is pretty clear.

Live a life where you depend on yourself or others for success and happiness...

Or, choose a life where you open yourself to the Ruach, the energy, the Spirit of God who will work in and through you.

Keep in mind, the words energy and spirit and wind can have a full or big sense to them.

But God’s spirit doesn’t have to be big to be noticed.

It just needs to be recognized, remembered, revealed.

Unfortunately, that usually requires some work on our part.

Now, the good news is we don't need to run farther or eat less or read more.

Although those things might be easier to do in the end.

To feel the Holy Spirit working, we just need to be open.

Church words are intentional or mindful or present.

But for me it means being open.

Open to the possibility that God loves us.

Open to the idea that God made us to do inspiring things and be an inspiration to others.

Sometimes that openness comes at a price.

It requires us to lay down those other things that occupy our hands and rid ourselves of those dark things that weigh down our hearts.

One way we do it is when we receive communion.

We have to open our hands to receive the gift of Jesus.

The Holy Spirit asks nothing more and nothing less.

For us to open ourselves.

When you say today, "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life who has spoken through the prophets" – be open to what the means in your life.

I think it is time to give that idea a try.

I think it is time to be open to what the Holy Spirit has in store...

What breakthrough is just waiting for all of us.

For you.

For me.

For this church.

For this nation.

To be inspired.

To be us, only better.