

CONNECTED IN SPIRIT

Corona del Mar Community Church, Congregational

Rev. Mary Scifres
Acts 2:1-20

May 20, 2018
Pentecost Sunday

“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.”¹ From the first moment of creation, God’s Spirit has been with us, amongst us, hovering, abiding, calling us into the light of God’s first creative moment. Today’s reading from Acts, the story of the Spirit’s movement on Pentecost is yet another creation story, in a long line of creation stories, this one giving birth to the community of Jesus’ followers we now call “the church.” But even this “new” creation story is built upon a long history of God’s Spirit striving to work with humanity, to transform us, and create us to be the creative partners with God we are meant to be and become.

Since the first moment of creation, God has been with us, God’s Spirit right here, ready to fill us with divine light and empower us to create God’s realm upon this earth. The sad truth is that our biblical story is a story of the ongoing failure of this dream God has for us. By the 6th chapter of Genesis, God is ready to give up on us, God’s Spirit tired of striving to reach us, God’s hope for humanity is starting to dim, and so we have that famous story of God destroying the earth with a flood and saving only Noah’s family and the animals of his infamous ark. The point of this dramatic story isn’t to decide upon its historical accuracy or mythical fantasy. The story is given to wake us up. God’s Spirit doesn’t want to have to strive so hard! Really, do I have to send a flood to get your attention?! Do you only notice me when there is a double rainbow at Crystal Cove?!

God wants us to pay attention. The Spirit is here. Wake up! God's wants us to notice Spirit, and then actually interact with the Spirit, to listen and learn from the Spirit, to allow God's Spirit to intertwine with each of our own spirits so that in each of our lives, God can say, "Let there be light!" and the divine light within each of us will shine forth as brightly as the sun shone upon those earliest days of the earth's creation.

But we humans must be very slow learners. Because this huge book we call the Bible is just one story after another of God's Spirit coming to us, communicating with us, and calling us to follow where God leads and live in relationship with God's beautiful Spirit--and then us humans refusing to listen or follow work with the Spirit. If you read much scripture, you start to see that we humans are just not all that great in listening and following and working with the Spirit. Over and over again, God reaches out. Over and over again, God's Spirit arrives to work through God's people. Over and over again, God reaches and we resist. And yet, God never gives up. The Spirit is here, inviting us, calling to us, "Let there be light."

Throughout the Torah, God's Spirit strives to work through each of the leaders of the Hebrew people, to shine through them so that they can be a light to all the nations – through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and even so brightly through Joseph the dreamer that Pharaoh perceives it!² Speaking from a burning bush, God's Spirit begins to work through Moses, and when Moses gets frustrated with God's people and wants to give up, God sends the Spirit upon 70 leaders to assist Moses in guiding the Hebrew people to become the people of God they are meant to be.³

1 Genesis 1:1-3, NRSV

2 Genesis 41:38. As Joseph helps to save Egypt from the famine he has prophesied from his dreams, Pharaoh exclaims, "Can we find such a one as this, a man in whom the Spirit of God is?!"

3 Exodus 3:1-4 and Numbers 11:17

And so the Spirit continues through Joshua and Samuel and David, David who writes and sings those Psalms, yearning for God's Spirit to control his Spirit – writing some of his most beautiful poems after he has failed miserably at letting the Spirit into his life. In Psalm 51, David cries out, “Create in me a clean heart, and renew a right Spirit within me.” David, who did such marvelous things when he let God's Spirit guide him, did just as many horrible things when he ignored the Spirit and focused only on his own personal agenda. But David's a sermon for another day.

As the Hebrew kingdom grew and expanded, rose and fell, God's Spirit worked most often through the prophets. Isaiah prophesies that a branch of Jesse, a descendent of David, would spring forth and the Spirit of the Lord would be upon him; this is the prophesy that Jesus quotes as he begins his ministry.⁴ But in the later days of the prophets, the promise of Spirit begins to change. Through the later prophets like Ezekiel and Joel, God promises to pour the Spirit upon all of us, to invite all of us to listen and learn with the Spirit, as we were first invited at the time of creation. “Let there be light.” And so we come full circle in today's story of the Pentecost miracle, for in that miraculous story, God is creating God's people all over again. In this mysterious story of God's Holy Spirit rushing through that room, God's Spirit comes to empower Christ's followers to go forth and do the work of spreading God's love, sharing the good news of Christ Jesus, and healing and teaching and performing miraculous deeds with the strength of God's Holy Spirit.

⁴ Isaiah 61:1 and Luke 4:18; also reference Isaiah 11:2

On Pentecost Sunday, we are invited right back to that first day of creation, right back to God's original intent for us – to live as God's people, created in God's image, intended to shine forth with God's light and love for the world. The Holy Spirit is hovering amongst us, abiding with us, inviting us to hear the word of creation: "Let there be light!"

Will we answer the invitation and allow God's light to shine? We are the sons and daughters of whom Joel spoke. We are the young, called to see visions, and the old, called to dream dreams. We are the servants, both women and men, who are meant to bring God's Spirit front and center to guide our lives so that through us God can guide this world into the beautiful creation it is meant to be. We are at a critical juncture in this church, in our country, and in our world. Will we answer the Spirit's invitation and allow God's light to shine through us?

That early gathering in Jerusalem was at an equally critical juncture in their path. On that Pentecost day, some received the Spirit -- surprised and bewildered, yes -- but still open and available as the Spirit inflamed them to hear and see in a brand new way, to understand and perceive themselves and their world differently, to recognize their unity despite their differences in language and culture and opinion and preference. But others jeered, thought they were crazy-drunk, and that this Spirit thing was just a bunch of hogwash. And so Peter stood up, quoted the powerful prophecy of Joel. After Peter's amazing sermon, some who had rejected the Spirit cried out for another chance and were baptized and joined the community of followers. But even then, some did not. Such is the way of the Spirit. We are not going to be forced to listen. We are not going to be forced to shine with God's light. We are not going to be forced to follow Christ's teachings or go where the Spirit leads. ***But we are invited***, over and over again, as God's people always have been.

Will we accept the invitation? Will we build upon the best parts of our past, the teachings of Jesus, the creative power of God, and the wise strength of the Spirit? Will we walk forward with love of God, neighbor and self to guide our days and actions and words? Or will we repeat the mistakes of our ancestors and choose self-interest and personal agendas as our highest priorities? Whether it was Cain killing Abel, David taking another man's wife into his bed, Judas betraying Jesus, or Pilate washing his hands of all responsibility, the story of our faith is littered with people who chose self interest and personal agendas over the guidance of the Spirit. Which stories do we want to define our lives, our church, our community, and our world?

God's Spirit is here, as it was on that miraculous day of Pentecost so long ago. God's Spirit invites us to decide: Do we want to build upon the best parts of our past, the teachings of Jesus, the creative power of God, and the wise strength of the Spirit? Like Moses who stopped what he was doing to pay attention to a burning bush, or like David when he heeded God's guidance that he was not to build a temple, or like Mary when she believed the angel who told her she would give birth to a child who would change the world, or like Peter who bravely stood up and said, "Nobody is drunk here. This wild wind is nothing less than God's Holy Spirit poured out on all of us so that we can be the sons and daughters to prophesy, the young to see visions, and the old to dream dreams." If we choose to let Joel's prophecy and the Pentecost story define our lives, our church, our community, and our world, we truly can do anything through Christ who strengthens us.

If you read further in the Book of Acts this year, you will see how many miraculous, amazing, powerful things God was able to do through those first followers of Jesus. But you also notice that it's not an easy, clear path forward. In the early church, Peter and the disciples argued

often. They had tough decisions to make, and often they were unclear which decisions were best. They debated. They prayed. They decided they best they could. They made mistakes. They fought. They forgave. Often, they turned to their heritage and the leaders of their Jewish faith, to ask for help and guidance, debating and praying with them, even as those followers of Jesus begin deciding to widen their circle beyond Judaism and begin building a very new religion. That is the way of the Spirit – inviting and welcoming us, allowing us to debate and decide and argue and forgive, always with us, helping us take the next step. That is the way of the Spirit – inviting and welcoming us and as we receive the invitation and welcome it with joy, the Spirit widens the circle so that others can join the journey with us. Our love is able to expand, and our faith grows.

But first, we have to lay down our personal preferences, our selfishness, our hidden agendas, and even our worries and fears, so that God’s Spirit can abide in us fully, guiding us with wisdom and grace and love. Yes, these may seem like dark, troubled times, just as the days leading up to and after Jesus’ death were dark, troubled times.

But even in dark, troubled times, God is here, the Spirit hovering, creation awaiting as God calls to us, “Let there be light.” Humans are drawn to this call, from all walks of life. In J.K. Rowling’s third Harry Potter story, her character Professor Dumbledore tells a frightened group of Hogwarts students even as evil ghosts are surrounding their school, “Happiness can be found in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light.”⁵ May we heed God’s call, trust the Spirit’s guidance, and remember to turn on the light, so that light might chase the darkness away and create a beautiful new beginning for all.

⁵ Rowling, J.K. *“Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban.”*
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