

FIRE AND WIND WITHIN  
[written in oral form]

Acts 2:1-21  
Pentecost, Year B

May 20, 2018  
Gordon Allaby

[opening by Elinor Snell -- recognition of indigenous land]

We have just been prompted to consider our place, our relationship to the land and with indigenous people. Our awareness has been opened to ponder a bigger picture, including our relationships with other people.

I wonder if we do enough to open and invite other possibilities and realities?

~~~~~

Pentecost Sunday can be such a prompt.

In Acts 2, Luke presents a moving and fanciful narrative about receiving the Holy Spirit. We sometimes think that this is the launching / the beginning of God's Spirit affecting people, but it's not. God's Spirit was active in the Old Testament, often call Ruach.

After the resurrection, Jesus invited the disciples to "Receive the Holy Spirit", in John 20:22.

Paul often wrote about believers being moved by God's Spirit as part of "Being Saved."  
Moreover, he notes the Pentecost event as a gathering of 500 believers in I Corinthians 15:6, but does not embellish it.

Regardless, the Acts account is intended to impress upon all readers the intense moving of the Spirit and it's transformative power.

Peter, during his Pentecost sermon, quotes the prophet Joel, emphasizing that God's Spirit will pour out on All people.

Remember that point: All people. God's Spirit reaches out to all people, not just the Jews..... or Christians.

~~~~~

Just before the ascension, Jesus said, "...you will receive Power when the Holy Spirit [comes to you]...."

God's Spirit is moving, grants power and is transformative, yet... in our circles, we rarely talk about it.....or how we have been affected by God's Spirit.

I think we are missing something.

I have heard Mennonites from Colombia, from Ethiopia and elsewhere boldly proclaim the moving influence of the Spirit, including references to spiritual warfare.

But, we do not. I think we are missing something.

~~~~~

After the recent wind storm, a man walked into his local Home Hardware store, and said to the salesperson, "I need a saw to cut up the trees that have fallen all over my property."  
The salesperson answered, "I have just the saw for you. This one is guaranteed to cut up at least 10 trees in a day." He assured the man that it was their best saw.  
The man said, "Then, that's the saw for me."

However, the following day, the man returns to the store in a furious mood. Looking at the salesperson and holding up the saw in front of him, he complains, "I only managed to cut up 2 trees, yesterday, and it wasn't easy. You guaranteed that I could do 10!"

The salesperson was perplexed, and assured the man that it was their finest saw. So, he took the saw from the man, slide the choke on, and pulled the cord. After it started, he revved the throttle to make sure it was working properly.  
Surprised, the man blurted out, "Wait..... what's that noise?"

~~~~~  
That man was missing the power.

~~~~~  
To demonstrate the radical, moving influence of God's Spirit, Luke describes it like hearing the rush of a violent wind and spreading like tongues of fire.

For me, tornadoes and forest fires come to mind.

I've seen a number of tornadoes, including an F5, and tornadoes are frightfully impressive,.....and loud.

Twice, I've driven through forest fires, and they are terrifying, especially how the flames can leap across roads and even water.

Both tornadoes and forest fires can seriously alter the landscape.  
They are powerful, and so it makes sense that we humans have sought to control and contain wind and fire,...as we spread our influence and control over most everything.  
Nature has a way of embracing such things, but the wind and fire is an affront to us, unless we are controlling them.

~~~~~  
We like to be in control. We try to be in control.  
We feel uneasy giving up control.  
The response at Pentecost, 2,000 years ago, was about people out of control, and under the influence of God's Spirit.

~~~~~  
I think we know about the desirable benefits of allowing God's Spirit in to move and control us,.....yet....we don't dwell on that.  
We don't talk about it much, and we definitely don't connect the moving of God's Spirit to a mighty wind or tongues of fire.

~~~~~  
Our religious experience is more in our heads / our thoughts.  
We form and think about lofty things.

To be sure, we need reason and good judgment in order to avoid unfounded superstition and whimsical indulgences.

Yet, I wonder how we got to the point of missing so much about God's Spirit.

~~~~~

I suppose our desire for control led us to our current condition.

This pattern likely was reinforced by religious leaders throughout the ages. Knowledge and theology can be dictated and controlled.

God's Spirit can Not be controlled.

Leaders enjoy power and the things that bring them power, such as demanding theological conformity.

Perhaps, that habit of seeking control was a factor in our diminished spirituality. ???

~~~~~

In my early life, getting it "right" was critical for me.

I tried to put a theological puzzle together, and fit into it, too.

Sorting out how atonement works was important, as was sanctification.

I sought to know about God and Jesus, and to make sense of all the Biblical inconsistencies.

My religion was in my rational thoughts....., thoughts that I mostly formed and controlled.

~~~~~

Over time, I've come to realize that all that theology and Biblical knowledge are mere sign posts on the way. They are like the Google Maps app giving directions,... one turn at a time.

I may need to turn left in 300 metres, but that is not my destination.

My goal / my destination is not to obey the Bible or even know all about Jesus.

My goal / my purpose is to connect with God.

~~~~~

I can search Google about someone, and I can read their faith statement, and get a good idea about who that person is, Period.

BUT, I will not truly know that person unless I commune with him or her, until I talk, live, laugh and cry with that person.

We can **not truly** know another until we let them into our lives.

~~~~~

Possessing information and sorting our philosophies into neat files is NOT enough. We know that.

We feel the need for more.

I think our spiritual need is in our DNA. It's in our creation spark.

Fredrick Buechner said, and his name is pronounced "Beekner".

He said,

"In a sense, we are all hungry and in need, but most of us don't recognize it."

~~~~~

When God's Spirit comes to us, we feel it, but may not recognize it.

And so, we don't open up / we don't release control, and blocking God's Spirit can make us very comfortable.

It is most disruptive and distressing to block God's spirit.... because inside, our heart is crying out to connect with God.

~~~~~  
~~~~~

A brief aside on spirituality:

It is very naive to think that there is only a spirit / only a good spirit/ that there is only God's spirit. Oh, that notion can make us feel safe, safe enough to live without a deep connection to God.

Life is full of counterbalances and influences, and so it is with spirituality. The demonic is real, and please discard the personification images for evil. It's not that simple.

However, I do believe that the demonic seeks to keep us from God, and one good way is to make us dull to spirituality.

If we are numb, then the demonic can move more freely.

When we hate and do violence, then we are under the evil's influence.

~~~~~

I suppose most of us don't think about this,.....and perhaps that means we are numb.

~~~~~

If and when we do have a mountain top experience, then we will experience the strong counter attack from the demonic. The demonic seeks to separate us from God.

Consider Jesus' mountain top experience. The temptation in the desert followed immediately after it.

~~~~~

This may sound a bit unnerving and intimidating,.... if we are trying to be in control.....and if we have forgotten that God / that Love is more powerful than evil. We do not need to fear when we are connected with God / when God's Spirit dwells within.

~~~~~

We may not want to contemplate such spiritual battling.

Regardless, we cannot hide in dullness.

We sense God's Spirit reaching to us,.....and we desperately want to be loved / to be filled with love.

Deep down, we know that, and we keenly sense that deprivation in the evening's quite solitude.

~~~~~

Yet, we struggle. We feel the pain, and the aloneness / the separation from God.

~~~~~

I propose three reasons for this struggle. Three ways we block God's Spirit.

One:

Our lust for control blocks God's indwelling Spirit. Being in control includes our penchant for being Biblically and theologically correct. I imagine that God wants to connect with us and to know us... much more than God wants us to obey the rules.

To be sure, when we love, we will likely live as Jesus did.

Our need for control is a statement that we are more important and more powerful than we are.

Two:

Fear and worry can block the flow of God's Spirit.

We may pray and plead for God more often when we are anxious and afraid, but our fear and worry is a sign that we don't really trust God.

I think God will answer our prayers with comfort and assurance, yet we still need to let go and have faith.

Three, and this may surprise you:

Electronic entertainment is a significant deterrent to allowing God's Spirit in. They are not inherently evil; they are merely forms of entertainment, yet electronic entertainment controls our thoughts and consumes our time in ways that disengages us, dulls us and removes us from the richness of real relationships.

As I pondered this, I wondered if there is a correlation between the decline of the church and the rise of electronic entertainment. TV became ubiquitous in the 1960's, and that is when Christianity began to falter. These days, we are in constant contact with electronic entertainment, to the point of being addicted.

And these days, people are crying out for connection / for love.... for more in life. And, there isn't an app for that.

I'm suggesting that electronic entertainment is stealing our time and openness to being spiritually connected with God. It is a distraction.

So, a church that does not live and demonstrate the power of God's Spirit offers little more than any other club or community group.

Without the radiant power of God's Spirit, we are competing with all other social organizations. God's Spirit is powerful. Are we missing that?

~~~~~

There are likely other things and reasons we block God's Spirit.

Here are a few suggestions on how to open up / how to allow God's Spirit in.

First, is letting go of control, and this includes the arrogant notion that "All I have to do is ask God's Spirit in."

We are not in control, and I don't think God jumps when we command.

Some examples that open us up:

--remove things and behaviours that block the spiritual.

-- Art, music,.... singing all touch us deeply.

And, I'll toss in dancing too.

--Boredom and silence help.

--Being in nature, and I should say and stress **being with nature**.

--authentic, vulnerable relationships with people is good

--Worship and ritual can be tools to invite in God's Spirit.

And, of course, meditation and contemplation are instrumental, when we are seeking to connect with God.

Oh,... and do ask God. It's good to ask,... and then wait expectantly; wait in God's time.

~~~~~

I've given just some examples.

As Peter said, God's Spirit comes to all people, and we are all a little different.

So, find your way.....be it smudging, reading the Bible or a moment of Zen.

Just seek to be open to God.

~~~~~

This is the easy part of this sermon.

I don't have to convince you of anything.

God's Spirit will take care of that.

Just imagine,.....being connected with God!

Think about what that means.

Consider the impact of having God's Spirit setting our hearts on fire!