

## What the Spirit Will Do

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.  
The Day of Pentecost. May 15, 2005.*

Pentecost is the great celebration of the life-giving, gift-giving power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said that unless we were born of water and the Holy Spirit, we could never even *see* the Kingdom of God. He said that he was going to send the Holy Spirit to his disciples, and the Spirit would “lead you into all the truth.” St. Paul, in the passage we read this morning, said that each one of us receives a manifestation of the Holy Spirit “for the common good.”

All of that should give us a wonderful, positive feeling about the Holy Spirit. But there’s something about the Holy Spirit makes us Episcopalians uneasy. Maybe it’s because the Holy Spirit is the unpredictable person of the Trinity. It seems like the Holy Spirit comes into our churches and into our personal lives and sometimes does things we neither expect nor — perhaps — even want.

When at the time of the Ascension Jesus told his friends to go back and wait in Jerusalem until they had received “power from on high,” I doubt they anticipated the *kind* of thing that happened on Pentecost: ...the sound of a hurricane in the house, ...the appearance of flames in the air, ...and – to top it all off – the whole strange episode of a hundred and twenty people inspired by the Spirit to rush out into the street speaking in foreign languages. Acts tells us that the people in Jerusalem that morning thought the disciples of Jesus were drunk. But they weren’t. Instead, they had suddenly – under the impulse of the Holy Spirit – become free and fearless – uninhibited, we might say – for the first time since Jesus had been arrested. Reveling in this new freedom, they began speaking in public about Jesus of Nazareth, who had been raised from the dead, announcing to everyone that he was Lord. This was – to say the least – an extremely controversial thing to say.

On Pentecost Day, on fire with the Spirit, Peter gave a bold sermon in the city streets. He was speaking to Jews from all over the world who had come to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost. Acts says that this single sermon led 3,000 people to be baptized. Peter was not a famous orator. He was, in fact, an uneducated, unsophisticated fisherman from a village in Galilee. Earlier in Jesus’ ministry Peter had spouted off lots of brave talk, saying things like “though everyone else abandon you, Lord, *I* will never leave you.” But when Jesus had been arrested he proved to be spineless and denied that he even knew Jesus. Now, however, Peter was brave enough to preach to a potentially hostile public crowd... and he never played the coward again. What caused the change? *The Holy Spirit*. That was the first *Christian* Pentecost, and it gave the Church a foretaste of what the Holy Spirit was going to do. When the Spirit of God inspires a church or a person, there are bound to be fireworks. Big things happen. —And they’re rarely things that church leaders – bishops or rectors or vestries – have anticipated.

When the people of God are filled the Spirit – God’s breath, as I called it last Sunday – they lose their fear about what might happen if God does “a new thing.” They lose their worry about hostile public opinion and criticism (which inevitably do follow). The history of Christianity is the record of one “movement” after another which the Spirit has inspired in order to bring new life, new energy when the Church had grown stale and unfruitful. You all know about some of these movements —like the one that Francis of Assisi started in the Middle Ages, the Protestant Reformation, the work of the Wesleys in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the Pentecostal Movement which started at a little Bible college in Topeka, Kansas, in 1906, jumped to Los Angeles and then swept across the world. (Pentecostalism has been the single most powerful movement in world Christianity in our lifetime, and its energy is far from spent.)

You’d be right if you said that each of these movements – Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther, the Wesleys, and the early Pentecostals – aroused opposition and criticism, but (in spite of the opposition) they all brought God’s new life to the Church.

Maybe we Episcopalians are leery of the work of the Holy Spirit because we’re afraid that if we invite the Spirit of God to do a new thing in our churches, then He’ll turn us into “holy rollers.” And we don’t want *that*.

We don't want to be like some of those churches we've seen (usually by accident) on TV when we're channel surfing. We like our dignified Prayer Book services – where sermons are never over 20 minutes and everything is “done decently and in order.” Being an Episcopalian is an acquired taste, we admit, but it's one that we've acquired. So we're a little uneasy that if the Holy Spirit comes blowing into our midst, He'll insist on bringing along drums and synthesizers and rock music and He'll make us speak in tongues and behave in ways that don't fit our temperament. There might even be miracles! (Gosh, what would we do *then*?)

Well, let me tell you something about the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the *breath* of God our Father who gave us our life, and who loves us, knows us and nurtures each one of us in our own unique personality and character. It isn't God's style to push us around or make us feel silly. (The Holy Spirit has nothing in common with a nightclub hypnotist who invites a volunteer to come up on stage so he can make him think he's a rooster. Nothing at all.) God deals sweetly and gently with us. When God's Spirit leads us into a new thing – whatever it might be – He doesn't leave us feeling “violated” or embarrassed. He leaves us feeling exquisitely happy and fulfilled—even if we've been turned in a totally new spiritual direction.

Another thing about the Holy Spirit is that He doesn't barge into our lives uninvited. We have to ask Him in. We have to issue an invitation. We have to hold the door open for him. The Spirit came upon the little band of Christians in Jerusalem on the first Pentecost because they had been steadfastly waiting and praying that God would send his “promise” upon them. They didn't know exactly what the Spirit was going to do when He came, but they were united in asking for Him to come. They had known Jesus; they remembered well what it had felt like to have Jesus with them. How could the *Spirit* of Jesus be anything but good? So they prayed for the Spirit to come. —And so should we.

What if today the Holy Spirit came – whether with the noise of a hurricane or quietly, as on kitty-cat feet – right into our church? What if the Spirit came and gave us the power we need if we're going to be all that God wants us to be in this place where we live? What would we do then?

Last week I told you that I've always wanted to rehabilitate the word *evangelism* for Episcopalians. Half a century ago Episcopalians had the reputation of being “God's frozen people.” But we've been thawed out for years. We're not stuck up and stuffy any more. We don't get in a huff if we come into church late and find someone else sitting in “our” pew. We've learned how to be friendly to visitors, and we can be really chatty at coffee hour. We've loosened up a lot. But many of us still get tongue-tied if we're asked to talk about what we believe. We stutter and stumble and then we fall back on the old script, a line we all know: “Well, you see, my faith is very *private*.” Phooey! One point of the first Pentecost of the Church was to show that God wants our faith to be *shared*, not kept a secret. When the Spirit comes upon us, He'll help us share our faith *and He'll make us feel good about doing it!* That's how inspiration works.

We sing some beautiful traditional hymns in our church. But do we really *mean* the words of these hymns we sing? Would we dare to *say* some of the things we sing in hymns? Right before the Gospel, we sang: “*Breathe on me, Breath of God, fill me with life anew, that I may love what thou dost love, and do what thou wouldst do.*” Those are good, “King James English” words, written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Did we *mean* what we sang? In case we weren't really alert to the words we were singing, I want you to get out the blue hymnal and turn to Number 508. And I want to invite you to read just the first verse aloud with me, as a prayer.

You don't have to do this if you don't want to. If you *don't* want the Breath of God to fill you with life anew (full of all the surprises that new life brings), then just sit there quietly. But if you *do* want the Spirit of God, the Breath of God, to do a new thing in your life and in our church's life, join me in praying these familiar words. Open the door of your heart, and invite the Spirit in. Say: “*Breathe on me, Breath of God, fill me with life anew, that I may love what thou dost love, and do what thou wouldst do.*”

I pray that the Breath of God will fill us with new life today, just as He filled the little band of believers on the first Pentecost. May He loosen our tongues and set our hearts on fire. And may He send us from this place with a new will and a new power to proclaim the good news of Christ to everyone.