

Dreams, Visions, New Horizons

Acts 2:1-21

Pentecost/ 9th June 2019

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit breathed new life into despairing disciples which propelled them outward toward the world with a revolutionary message of God's transforming love. The Holy Spirit took disparate people, strangers, people alien to one another, separated by language and cultural differences, and spoke to them of a story that had the power to galvanize diverse groups of people together into one people, into Christ's new people, a new community of people, people called out from the crowd, into a church—an *ekklesia*, called out from the crowd to be Christ's witness in the world, called out and caught up in the dreams, visions, and new horizons offered by the Holy Spirit.

What's so striking, when you read the book of Acts, is the way the Holy Spirit is the protagonist of the story. The Spirit is an agent of creation, creates a church, forms a people. Last week, we saw how the Spirit is Advocate and guide and teacher. Today, I want to lift up the Spirit as the giver of dreams and visions, helping us to imagine new horizons, new possibilities. In this way we can say, with the early church, that the Holy Spirit is the Giver and Renewer of Life. As one who gives life, the Spirit is an agent of creation. The Spirit formed something new that wasn't there before—a new people, a new community. The Spirit is, therefore, like an artist who can imagine and envision new possibilities in familiar, stuck, stagnant, and hopeless situations and then encourage us to venture forth, to step out in faith toward the future. The Spirit forms new men and women out of men and women who are broken and have lost their way, who need to begin again. As Paul said, "Everyone in Christ is a New Creation." The former life is past, behold we have all become new (2 Corinthians 5: 17).

The Spirit is the agent of creation and recreation. The Nicene Creed describes her as "the Lord and Giver of Life." Across the centuries theologians have understood this to mean that the Spirit as Lord is *constantly* at work as the giver of life. It's not an occasional thing where the Spirit drops down into our ordinary lives, renews us for a season and then goes away. The Spirit is at work sustaining every moment of creation. This was the way John Calvin (1509-1564) saw things. "The creation was not just the utterance of a rational fiat upon the part of God, which then left created being with an existence in itself..." He thought of creation as continuous and as continually depending upon the communication of the divine Word, in such a way that it was maintained in being, and governed by God...[A human being] is a created being, in body and soul, and utterly dependent upon God from moment to moment. Calvin used to think of humans as "being consumed and renewed every instant of one's existence, for we are continuously being called out of non-being into being and life by the Word and will of the Creator, the Lord of life and death."¹ In other words, every second of our lives is dependent upon the movement of the Spirit giving us life. Should this ever stop we all would collapse into nothingness. We would simply cease to exist if God were to withdraw God's Spirit from us. All of existence, every moment is sustained by the one who called and continues to call us into being.

And, so, the Spirit is the presence of the Resurrected Christ, who embodies the life-giving power of God, who seeks to give us life—not just in the life to come, but is giving us God's life

now—and who yearns to give us the freedom to receive and welcome the life God wants to give us. Do you imagine God yearning to give you life?

Decades before Luke wrote his account of Pentecost, Paul described the work of the Spirit this way: “Now the Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom” (2 Corinthians 3: 17,18). Freedom from sin, freedom to grow up into the people Christ calls us to become; freedom for life within the will of God; freedom to follow the way of Christ—despite whatever others might say or do to us. As Paul said to the Galatians, “For freedom Christ has set us free” (Galatians 5:1).

The Holy Spirit is that agent of life, breathing in and through us, an “incredibly benevolent force,” who wants us to come to life in Christ and discover in that relationship a freedom that is beyond measure. Coming to life in Christ is coming alive to the life God intends for all God’s children. One of my favorite quotes is from the early church theologian Irenaeus (c.115 - c.202) who said, “The glory of God is the human being fully alive.” God is glorified when human beings come to life, and become fully alive. And one of the ways the Spirit calls us to life, making us more alive, is not by turning toward the past or regressing back to childish ways, but helping us lean forward into the future. God gives us dreams, visions, new horizons that summon us, lure and entice us, inspire us, challenge us, but also excite us and make us happy, which then encourage us to step out and step into the life that the Spirit is slowly trying to see emerge in us, emerge in us as the church, and emerge in the world—through us.

The Spirit is dynamic. Active. Moving in us, trying to move us—because that’s how the Spirit was/is, at work in Christ. “What the Spirit did to the human nature of Jesus Christ—elevating, endowing, and empowering—can be expected to be the future for every human being.”² This means that, right now, we are part of a larger drama of God’s movement in the world. Movement will be one of the themes of next year’s General Assembly when it meets here in Baltimore. The church as movement. The church on the move, moving out beyond the walls of the sanctuary. Motivated by the Spirit. What happens to us in the here and now is part of a larger picture, a bigger story of redemption (as we will explore in worship throughout the summer).

And, “Onward toward that goal the Spirit drives the world, but this process takes time.”³ Anything worthy of God requires time. And in the meantime, we must not be discouraged or allow cynicism or negativism to take hold of us, because cynicism and negativism will devour us if we’re not careful. Instead, we can look for signs. Look for the places and people that are calling you to life—right now. Theologian Walter Kasper suggested this helpful signpost for us: “Everywhere that life breaks forth and comes into being, everywhere that new life as it were seethes and bubbles—wherever true life exists, there the Spirit of God is at work.”⁴

On this Pentecost Sunday, let us give thanks for the Holy Spirit, active in our lives, in the church, and in the world. The Spirit is breathing new life into us. Offering comfort and assurance. Enabling us to walk in the way of Christ with courage and boldness. The Spirit is dreaming through us. Granting visions, helping us to see new horizons, new possibilities. Giving hope. The Spirit is calling us to life! So let us turn to the Spirit and open our hearts. Let us pray together:

*Come, Holy Spirit,
lamplighter,
midwife of change,
comforter,
advocate,
teacher,
disturber,
inspirer,
giver of life.*

*Come, fill us and your church with gifts the earth can neither produce or afford.
Come, fill our lives with that rich mixture of peace and restlessness,
calm and enthusiasm, which are hallmarks of your holiness.
Come, Creator Spirit.
Come, breath of life.
Come, fire of love.
Come, power of hope.
Come and lead us into your life.
For the sake of Jesus Christ and the glory of God. Amen.⁵*

¹ Thomas F. Torrance on Calvin in *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1965), 103-104.

² The view of the Reformed theologian Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), in Cornelis van der Kooi, *This Incredibly Benevolent Force: The Holy Spirit in Reformed Theology and Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 93.

³ The view of Kuyper in Cornelis van der Kooi, 93.

⁴ Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, cited in William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 64.

⁵ Prayer for Pentecost (adapted) from *The Book of Common Order of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1994), 443.