

Of the three persons of the Trinity, I believe that the Spirit of God is the least understood. And Pentecost the least understood of special days on the church calendar.

And why not? Jesus talked about the Spirit of God as an advocate, a comforter, someone who would come in his place—which, when you think about the passages such as ones in John in which Jesus speaks about the Spirit of God coming to the disciples, the text implies a visible figure, a person in human form much like Jesus. On the other hand, at Pentecost the Spirit is envisioned as coming in the rush of a violent wind, the *pneumatōs* in the Greek, leaving the gift of tongues on all of the disciples that caused them to burn as with fire. At the time of Creation the Spirit is there, again a wind, the *ruach* in Hebrew, that was active in God's creativity; and in the Valley of Dry bones it is the *ruach* that gives life to the bones. Paul describes the Spirit as a blend of the two—a presence that is less a human-shaped being but neither a violent wind, but rather a gentle breath that intercedes when we are unable to pray as we ought.

Even in the early days of the organized church (say, around the time of the council of Nicea in the 4th century) there was disagreement about the nature of the Spirit. Was the Spirit a part of God or was the Spirit something separate, something created by God? Were the Spirit, and Jesus the Christ for that matter, mere emissaries of God or were they God's actual presence on earth?

We know where those discussions led because one way we describe ourselves is as "Trinitarian"—in other words, we believe in one God who is present to us in 3 persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or God, Christ and Spirit, most often, but also Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer as well as other sets of terms for the three persons of God. There are Christian sects that are not Trinitarian—Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Scientists and Unitarian Universalists to name a few-- but for us the three persons of the Trinity are co-equal, divine and relevant to our experience of faith.

Today is practically the only day of the year that we really focus on the third person of the Trinity, the Spirit, and that is really only because it is Pentecost. We understand Pentecost to have been the day the helper was given to the early church as Jesus predicted would happen. We often think of this day as the 'birthday of the church' and have coopted the term *Pentecost* to set it aside as a special day in our church life and work. But I think we do the Pentecost, the Spirit, and ourselves a disservice if we limit our understanding in that way. (I offer thanks to D. Mark Davis of the blog *Left Behind and Loving It* for help with a look at where Pentecost came from and why it is significant to us today.)

If we look back into Hebrew tradition we find the roots of Pentecost in Leviticus. Leviticus 23:15-22 reads: "And from the day after the sabbath, from the day on which you bring the sheaf of the elevation-offering, you shall count off seven weeks; they shall be complete. **You shall count until the day after the seventh sabbath, fifty days; then you shall present an offering of new grain to the Lord.** You shall bring from your settlements two loaves of bread as an elevation-offering, each made of two-tenths of an ephah; they shall be of choice flour, baked with leaven, as first fruits to the Lord. You shall present with the bread seven lambs a year old without blemish, one young bull, and two rams; they shall be a burnt-offering to the Lord, along with their grain-offering and their drink-offerings, an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord. You shall also offer one male goat for a sin-offering, and two male lambs a year old as a sacrifice of well-being. The priest shall raise them with the bread of the first fruits as an elevation-offering before the Lord, together with the two lambs; they shall be holy to the Lord for the priest. On that same day you shall make proclamation; you shall hold a holy convocation; you shall not work at your occupations. This is a statute for ever in all your settlements throughout your generations.

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the Lord your God.”

The Hebrew word for this festival is *Shavuot* and is known as the “Festival of Weeks” because it happened 7 weeks after another special offering. It came over time to be associated with the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai but was probably originally a harvest festival. The number of weeks was 7 and the day after the final Sabbath of the 7 weeks was the 50th day and so in Greek translations of Hebrew texts the festival became known as Pentecost (for the Greek word *pente* which means 5.) In the Leviticus text I just read the Shavuot served as a reminder to landowners to take care of the landless by not reaping their whole field, by leaving behind any grain that was dropped and by *perhaps even dropping some grain on purpose in order that the landless might glean enough grain to keep themselves going*. It was a reminder that all we have comes from God and therefore it is the responsibility of those who have much to give away some of what we have to those who have none.

And it is the feast of the Shavuot, or Pentecost, that has brought people from many lands to Jerusalem. At this time Jerusalem is a fairly cosmopolitan city with residents from various lands; but at the same time many had come to offer sacrifices at the temple and celebrate the festival. The disciples are gathered—perhaps in the upper room, perhaps somewhere else, when the violent (and noisy!) wind comes and suddenly they are able to speak in languages that they could not speak in before. People outside could hear them and understand and some were amazed but some just couldn’t believe their ears and attributed the ruckus to drunkenness.

So even if we find it confusing we can see that the *ruach* or *pneuma* was a very powerful force. It animated bones of the house of Israel, bringing new life to a people cut off from their temple and home. It caused the disciples of Jesus to burn with the knowledge of new languages that would be necessary to know if they were to carry the good news to the farthest corners of the earth. The Spirit is even powerful enough to bring hope to the hopeless and pray for us when we don’t know how to pray for ourselves. That it came to the disciples on Pentecost can’t be a coincidence, for what is it that spurs us to do as God requires but the Spirit of God?

For many of us the understanding of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost is that before that there was no Spirit or no understanding of the Spirit of God—which is clearly not true; at most we can see the coming of the Spirit as an indicator that something was happening that had to do with Jesus Christ and his followers. In a way we can understand it as an undoing of Babel, when God separated the people into different language groups to ensure they spread across the face of the earth. Now was the time to take the good news to all nations, good news of peace and justice, light and hope, and love of God for all people. Hope that good would come from suffering, justice that would feed and heal and unite, love that would never end.

Have you ever felt a *ruach*, a spirit-filled wind blowing in your life? Moving you forward into unknown territory, making you able to do things you didn’t think you could do? Giving you hope for better days when the days you were living seemed too dark to continue? Did you let that Spirit in?

In American Christianity we tend to be a little afraid of the Spirit, I think. We have visions of people wildly out of control, rolling on the floor or waving their arms, shouting out in babbling voices and we think, *is that authentic?* The Pentecostal movement went farther away from our collective orthodox and catholic roots than even Protestantism and we are as suspicious of Pentecostal theology as we are of Catholic theology. We may prefer the spirit that Paul describes as helping us in our weakness, gently interceding with sighs too deep for words. A personal Spirit of God, helping us in our lives, giving us strength as individuals to endure our own personal tragedies and sorrows.

And while that is a perfectly good way to think about the Spirit of God working in our lives, we can't forget the manifestation of God's Spirit that moved over the waters of creation, that animated a whole valley of dry bones, that came on the disciples at Pentecost to remind the people of God that we are all God's people, the wild rush of wind that stirs us up and enables us to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.