

# SPIRIT OF RESTLESSNESS

*Rev Jim Allan  
Camrose United Church  
30 May 2004*

Acts 2:1-21 - The coming of the Holy Spirit

I'm wearing my hockey stole today! Really, it is Pentecost. I was thinking about Pentecost as a time for us to reflect and focus on following the spirit, discerning and following the leading of the spirit in our lives, and I realized that I don't want to talk about following the spirit as if it were something we don't do. Rather, and more importantly, I want to talk about it as something that we do. It is there in the experience of our lives, at some moment when the spirit has moved us and our lives have turned into a different direction. It might have been a time of crisis, a time of choice and new direction in life, or a time when we were just completely being taken by surprise. It is at those times when life has turned, when the spirit has moved us and somehow we were present enough to hear the spirit and courageous enough to respond and follow.

So before the service I checked to make sure there was a box of Kleenex here, because I was thinking back through the experiences I've had when people have shared the experience of the spirit moving in their lives. The most recent that came to mind was the annual Saturday-long workshop, following our annual meeting, with our new governing council and the committees. We began the day by going around the circle and having each one share a bit of his or her story, faith story, faith journey story, and reflected on the communion of saints and all those people in our past who were channels of the spirit for us in some way or another. It's not the sort of thing one can plan, but toward the beginning of the circle--and we had many people, perhaps forty--as someone told of one of the important things in their past, tears welled up and it was a surprise. That happens. It catches us by surprise when in some way at some moment we find ourselves remembering some time when we really felt the presence of the sacred and the spirit moving us in our lives.

As we went around the circle I went to the kitchen to get a box of Kleenex which became like a talking stick and was passed on from one person to the next. As people heard others' stories they were moved to tears, and it kept deepening and deepening as we went around the room, and the event turned into a kind of cry-in. That has happened to me before, but not very often with a group in some kind of program or gathering, acknowledging the spirit, sharing our stories and coming to know one another better. It can't be planned; there is no program design that says this is the part where we're all going to cry. Somehow the group, the space, the moment, is able to be open to the spirit. And those tears are not just grief, they're not just tears of laughter; rather they are a mix of it all. And yet it's something else. It's something in us such that when that part of us is touched, when those memories, those moments, those people, are brought to mind again, when that special time in our lives is brought to mind again, those tears come and are a sign to me that touches the spirit and the spirit touches us. There is a point of connection.

In a way, as we read the Bible and remember all those stories, what we are trying to accomplish is to touch the power of those moments all the way through the past. It's enlivening for us spiritually, deepening for us any time to remember or to share our personal stories. But in another equally powerful way, for a people together to remember their collective story has a power, and in a sense we are here because the power of the story tells us who we are, keeps us connected to God, to the centre of life. Jim Manley wrote a hymn called "Spirit of Gentleness" that is one of the most concise, beautiful, kind of touch, touch, touch, stories of the spirit throughout the ages, throughout the whole Judaeo-Christian story. It starts off with creation and the story of the spirit of God--or was it a "wind" from God. In modern versions of the Bible one of those translations, "spirit" or "wind," has been put into the text and a footnote added saying it could be the other word, because these terms are the same word in Hebrew. As a matter of fact, in every language about which I know anything, the word for "spirit" is based on the word for "wind" or "air"--the spirit of God hovering over the deep, right there from the beginning of creation.

And then the hymn moves to a verse that touches briefly and poetically on the Exodus--people brought out of Egypt and into a promised land. Remember Moses at the burning bush, those flames, that spirit of God speaking to Moses? And remember as the people made their way out of Egypt into the wilderness there was that column of fire by night and the cloud by day? The beautiful Hebrew word *shechinah* has that sense of glowing, that light that is the sign of sacred presence, guiding them, leading them. And the prophets--remember Isaiah's words that "the spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor"? The whole understanding of prophecy was rooted in an understanding and experience of the spirit, the spirit of God that comes upon and takes hold of a person, directing and empowering and giving that person something to offer the world in the power of the spirit.

The hymn then moves to the story of Jesus--his birth, his life and crucifixion--that amazing story of the passion and the power that was in there, and his sense of the spirit guiding and moving through all of that. And then the silence. Let me read you that verse; it is so beautifully brief and concise. "You sang [this is speaking to the spirit] in the stable, you cried from the hill, then you whispered in silence when the whole world stood still." This was after the Easter event, those fifty days, not knowing what was to come next, seeming that the greatest gift God had ever given the world was now gone. It is hard to recreate that sense for us because we know how the story ends. It's hard to put ourselves back into the time of this Easter, this amazing mystery of the Easter event, the resurrection and then nothing. What now? "And down in the city you called once again, when you blew through the people on the rush of the wind." So the story of Christ goes all the way to Pentecost when the wind blew, and there was that spirit of Christ back with them and the question "Now what?" was answered. "Now what," as we're brought together and bonded into this new thing that came to be known as the church and empowered to be the body of Christ in the world.

And then Manley goes on with the fourth verse that moves right up into the future: "You call from tomorrow, you break ancient schemes, from the bondage of sorrow the captives dream dreams. Our women see visions, our men clear their eyes, with bold new decisions your people arise."

And with those four brief verses Manley captures the entire story, the entire history of the Holy Spirit in our tradition. If we really let ourselves deeply into the power of each of those moments in the story, each of those moments can move us to tears as well, because it touches something deep within us that we experience in any of ten thousand different ways. One of these ways, I think, is the very creative symbolic picture on the cover of today's bulletin--just a sailboat. I used to, and maybe still do, use an exercise in spiritual growth programs where we reflect on the four primal elements--earth, water, fire and wind. I would bring symbols into the room so it was very sensory. Earth is easy to symbolize; you bring a pile of dirt or a stone. Fire is easy; just light a candle. Water is easy; just have a bowl of water.

There is always a dilemma trying to symbolize wind. At one time I had a picture of a sailboat and that's what I used; there was the wind. With the sailboat the wind in the sails picks up one aspect of our experience of the spirit which is the power. How many of you have sailed in a little sailboat? Not an awful lot of prairie kids. I've had a few experiences, not many, but what I really remember is just being out there in the water when it is calm. And then the wind picks up and the sails become adjusted just right and capture the full force of the wind, the boat takes off, and one feels the incredible power as the boat leans over. The power of the wind is simply amazing! We know that power in many other ways too, of course, but somehow one feels it really close in a sailboat. We have always recognized that the spirit, even though it is so elusive, has such an amazing power. It's as if there is nothing in the world that can resist the force of the spirit if the sails are set right--the sails of our souls, of our lives--to catch the power of that wind of God. There is nothing that can stand in our way.

Another way I used to symbolize the wind was with a feather. I found this feather at a fabric shop. It's fake, but it looks pretty good, doesn't it? It's eagle feather. It reminds me of the delicacy of the spirit, because wind is just like it's not even there. It gets out of the way when we move our hands, and it's just air if it's not moving. What can one do with that? And yet with this amazingly delicate feather--I can even feel it as I move it through the wind--I can feel how it rises easily and then pushes the air when it comes down. And a bird with feathers can fly, swoop, dive and turn. Remember the story of Jonathan Livingstone Seagull? It was an attempt to describe what it might be like to be a bird. It was discovering the ecstasy of flying and what can be done with that wind if one has a delicate way of touching it. Delicately touch the spirit. Now we haven't come any way near that. All we have been able to come up with is burning a ton of fossil fuel and blasting off as fast as possible. That's as close as we've come to flying; we've never got that delicate kind of being in the air except maybe in a glider or a hang glider. Feeling the updraft is as close as we have got. That must be a marvellous feeling, but it's nothing like what a bird can do with the wind. And I sometimes think of where we are as a human family with the Holy Spirit, as amazing as the spirit has been in our lives, but we ain't seen nothin' yet! In our ability actually to reach out and touch the spirit and then let it lift us and move us, we're like a jet aircraft that still hasn't come anywhere near the delicacy of an eagle or a seagull in flight.

Another way the spirit moves is like leaves rustling. Imagine a hot, still, summer day, lying out on the grass when there is not even a puff of breeze. If you are still enough, once in a while a little breeze comes along. And if there are trees you notice the

leaves start to rustle, just a subtle little bit of rustle. And the spirit is like that, too. It needs that stillness in us. That's what Sabbath is. Whether our Sabbath is Saturday or Sunday or another day, the wisdom of Sabbath is that once a week we must become still enough to hear the wind rustle the leaves--to hear the wind of God rustle the leaves of our souls.

Another aspect of the spirit is the way it brings beauty to everything it moves. When we move with the spirit there is a beauty in that movement. One of my favourite recent motion pictures is "American Beauty." It's a marvellous film in the sense of challenging us to look at life differently, to see something we haven't seen before. It has the ordinariness and in some ways the ugliness and disgustingness of life, and yet it's a way of seeing beauty. One of the characters has a movie camera and the viewers look at life through his lens. In one scene there are some leaves and junk in a corner of the driveway. One item is a plastic bag that was left lying there. The wind is swirling and swirling, and the bag just keeps moving and dancing. The character with the movie camera is filming it, and the bag is just dancing. It just goes on and on and on, this plastic bag; just a piece of garbage dancing in the wind. And yet the viewers begin to see the beauty of that dance with its amazing random movement.

And when the wind of God starts moving us, it's not always beautiful as a fashion show beauty pageant is beautiful. As a matter of fact it takes some of the ugliest parts of life, some of the parts that we have rejected, and it lets them become beautiful. I remember, years ago, at Naramata Centre where there is an openness to the spirit and a gentle loving acceptance of people the way they are, there was a dance almost every Friday evening. One week I was there, there was a girl in her early teens who was quite badly crippled. Most of the time she was in a wheel chair or on her crutches, and was quite bent and moved only with some difficulty. I could tell that everybody loved her and helped her all they could, and at the dance I was sitting there just watching the people. This young girl got up and began dancing. She seemed most awkward, and at first I thought that must be hard. And yet she was having fun, and as she went on she completely let go of her self-consciousness. It was a weird, romping, floppy movement, but one could tell she was just letting herself go with the spirit of the moment. There wasn't any ballroom grace to her movement, and yet what I saw was a deep beauty in that movement such that I didn't want to do anything but stay and watch her dance because of the beauty of how she was letting the spirit move her in whatever way it wanted to move her.

That's the dance that Jesus danced for us--from his birth as a poor refugee boy in Bethlehem, through the cruelty of his life and his death, the mystery of his resurrection, and then that amazing Pentecost experience. Then we have the floppy, clumsy, thing that this church has been throughout all the centuries, just doing its best to follow the flow of the spirit. When we step back and look at it and hear the story--the story of the prophets, the Exodus, the great saints in the history of the church--we see the spirit moving through it all, and we see a beauty that can be viewed only with the eyes of the soul. That is the beauty of the spirit of gentleness moving all through the centuries, through the years of our lives, and calling to us from our future.

Transcribed by Sue and By Reesor