

Note: The sermon for May 28 is actually two meditations on verses from Acts and Romans.

Meditation on Acts 2:1-4

When the holy day of Pentecost came 50 days after Passover, [a group of about 120 followers of Jesus, men and women] were gathered together in one place.

Picture yourself among the disciples: A sound roars from the sky without warning, the roar of a violent wind, and the whole house where you are gathered reverberates with the sound. Then a flame appears, dividing into smaller flames and spreading from one person to the next. All the people present are filled with the Holy Spirit and begin speaking in languages they've never spoken, as the Spirit empowers them.¹

This is how the Bible translation *The Voice* presents the first four verses of Acts 2. As I mentioned at the beginning of the worship service, today is Pentecost Sunday. The first Christian Pentecost happened during a Jewish festival called Pentecost. This was a time when Jerusalem was filled with devout Jews from a variety of nations, speaking a variety of languages. As about 120 Jewish followers of Jesus gathered in Jerusalem during this festival, they experienced this dramatic event filled with noise, spectacle, and visions.

You can read the rest of the second chapter of Acts to remind yourself of the reactions of those who witnessed the event, of Peter's speech to them, and of the crowd's response to what he said. This morning I want us to think about the Holy Spirit. How do you describe the Spirit? How do you experience the Spirit? Or maybe the question is, do you believe the Spirit exists and is active?

We don't talk about the Holy Spirit as much in many Mennonite churches as in some other denominations. It's difficult for us to think of the Spirit as a gift that is sent, received, and rests on God's people.

Perhaps we're uncomfortable with the mystery of the Spirit. Scriptural metaphors for God or Jesus are most often relational and intimate. God is our father, mother, protector, provider, creator. Jesus is our brother, teacher, shepherd, healer, redeemer. But metaphors for the Spirit are drawn from natural elements like flame, wind, cloud, water. These are impersonal forces that resist our control. Many of us acknowledge the existence of a higher power and the evidence that a man named Jesus lived more than 2000 years ago, but we don't know what to do with the Holy Spirit.

How do you envision the Spirit? When you think of the Spirit, what do you see, hear, feel, or touch? When you think of the Spirit, is there even something you smell or taste? Take a few minutes to think about how you would complete the sentence, "The Holy Spirit is like..."

Last year on Pentecost Sunday, a poet named Shari Wagner asked her congregation at First Mennonite Church of Indianapolis this same question. She used the 44 similes they suggested to write a collaborative poem titled "Come, Holy Spirit."² It appeared in the latest edition of *Anabaptist World*. Some of you may have read it already.

¹ Acts 2:1-4, *The Voice*

² [Of wind and fire | Anabaptist World](#)

This is how people at First Mennonite in Indianapolis describe the Spirit.

Come, Holy Spirit,
like a hummingbird
to surprise us!
Like a breath of wind
stirring the forest.
Like lightning's
illumination.

Flow, Holy Spirit,
like a river, providing power,
unleashing passions,
rising, falling, and
joining, like the Ganges,
mountain, plain, and ocean.

Refresh us, Holy Spirit,
like a cool sip of water,
like birdsong in the morning,
the breeze rustling sycamore
and aspen, sweet earthen scent
of forest floor.

Engulf us like blue sky
and the glow of dappled sunlight
through willow. Wrap us
like a scarf, a weighted blanket,
or the last wind of winter,
its promise of spring.

Holy Spirit, look upon us
as a parent beholds
their newborn child.
Walk beside us as our companion.
Support us when reviled
with a lawyer's fierce defense.

Be the beautiful, iridescent dream,
crashing wave and bubbling fountain,
hang glider we launch with,
swift race car delivering gifts,
warmth of a community kitchen
where all things sustain us.

Wake us up to live another day —
doing, loving, seeing!
Be our gentle task-giver,
healing therapist, the laughter
as we cry, fresh air through the vent,
waft of pine and campfire.

O shimmering Spirit,
spit, flare, diminish,
then rise again to leaping flames!
Be our common language,
our conscience, the yeast
for the bread we break.

Bristle, ever-present Spirit,
like static in our ears! Charge us
like fur on a long-haired cat.
Be the musical notes
on the staff of the wind,
the divine within us all.

Come, Holy Spirit, come.

Meditation on Romans 8:14-39

During the past few Sundays, we've read from Romans 1, 3, and 6. Remember that the churches in Rome included life-long Jews who became followers of Christ, non-Jewish people who converted to Judaism and became followers of Christ, and people who were followers of Christ but never became Jews. In his letter to this diverse group, Paul continually walked a tightrope between highlighting God's faithfulness to the covenant promises made to Israel and emphasizing God's welcome to all people, no matter their background and station in life.

In chapter 7, Paul addresses the inner conflict between the law and the flesh. He tries to explain why a person cannot do the good that the law intends to inspire. *“I can determine that I am going to do good, but I don’t do it;”* Paul laments, *“instead, I end up living out the evil that I decided not to do. Here’s an important principle I’ve discovered: regardless of my desire to do the right thing, it is clear that evil is never far away. For deep down I am in happy agreement with God’s law; but the rest of me does not concur.”*³

In chapter 8, Paul explains that the solution to the dilemma is the Spirit, whose presence within him displaces the power of sin and makes a new life possible.

Paul’s use of rhetorical questions and rather convoluted arguments from a variety of angles in his letter to the Romans makes it difficult to understand. We’re often left wondering what he is actually trying to tell his readers. As he describes life in the Spirit and the promise of future glory in chapter 8, it becomes a bit easier to connect with what he’s saying. Let’s read together, beginning with verse 14. As we read, note what Paul has to say about God’s Spirit. I’ll be reading from the *Common English Bible*.

*All who are led by God’s Spirit are God’s sons and daughters. You didn’t receive a spirit of slavery to lead you back again into fear, but you received a Spirit that shows you are adopted as his children. With this Spirit, we cry, “Abba, Father.” The same Spirit agrees with our spirit, that we are God’s children. But if we are children, we are also heirs. We are God’s heirs and fellow heirs with Christ, if we really suffer with him so that we can also be glorified with him.*⁴

God’s Spirit leads. God’s Spirit displaces fear. God’s Spirit allows us to refer to God as daddy, mommy, or whatever name we give to a loving parent. God’s Spirit gives us a sense of belonging. God’s Spirit lets us know that we are as worthy of receiving God’s blessings as anyone else in this world. And that everyone else in this world is as worthy as we are.

*I believe that the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed to us. The whole creation waits breathless with anticipation for the revelation of God’s sons and daughters. Creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice—it was the choice of the one who subjected it—but in the hope that the creation itself will be set free from slavery to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of God’s children. We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labor pains up until now. And it’s not only the creation. We ourselves who have the Spirit as the first crop of the harvest also groan inside as we wait to be adopted and for our bodies to be set free. We were saved in hope. If we see what we hope for, that isn’t hope. Who hopes for what they already see? But if we hope for what we don’t see, we wait for it with patience.*⁵

The Spirit brings newness of life to our present situation. The Spirit assures us of new life in the future. In the meantime, the created world groans with us as all of God’s creation waits for the fullness of time when all will be well. The Spirit brings hope and patience.

*In the same way, the Spirit comes to help our weakness. We don’t know what we should pray, but the Spirit himself pleads our case with unexpressed groans. The one who searches hearts knows how the Spirit thinks, because he pleads for the saints, consistent with God’s will. We know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose. We know this because God knew them in advance, and he decided in advance that they would be conformed to the image of his Son. That way his Son would be the first of many brothers and sisters. Those who God decided in advance would be conformed to his Son, he also called. Those whom he called, he also made righteous. Those whom he made righteous, he also glorified.*⁶

³ Romans 7:19, 21-23a, *The Voice*

⁴ Romans 8:14-17, *Common English Bible*

⁵ Romans 8:18-25, *Common English Bible*

⁶ Romans 8:26-30, *Common English Bible*

The Spirit of God not only speaks to us, but also intercedes with God for us. When we are too weak or sad or desperate or hurt to form words to pray, the Spirit of God prays for us. The Spirit of God gives voice to our laments.

Paul may not agree with me, but I don't believe that God causes everything that happens or that God knows ahead of time what's going to happen. However, we are predestined for God's love, no matter what happens. The Spirit of God is always with us even when we are completely unaware of the Spirit's presence.

So what are we going to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He didn't spare his own Son but gave him up for us all. Won't he also freely give us all things with him?

Who will bring a charge against God's elect people? It is God who acquits them. Who is going to convict them? It is Christ Jesus who died, even more, who was raised, and who also is at God's right side. It is Christ Jesus who also pleads our case for us.⁷

God's Spirit is our defender. So is Jesus. Since God is for us, who can be against us?

It's OK to lament, to complain, and to rail against God. It's OK to express our disappointment with God when it feels like God has abandoned us. But it's not helpful to search for a reason why God has abandoned us, or why something bad has happened to someone else. A more helpful exercise is to look for God's presence around us. What did we experience today that was good or true or beautiful? That is where God is.

Who will separate us from Christ's love? Will we be separated by trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,

We are being put to death all day long for your sake.

We are treated like sheep for slaughter.

But in all these things we win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us. I'm convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created.⁸

What will separate us from God? Nothing. What will separate us from God's Spirit? Nothing. But what if we are being killed? Nothing. But what if we are being persecuted? Nothing. But what if we are suffering? Nothing. But what if we are ill? Nothing. But what if we are lonely? Nothing. But what if we made a huge mistake? Nothing. Nothing separates us from God.

I'm convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love; nothing can separate us from God's Spirit: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created.

Thanks be to God!

⁷ Romans 8:31-34, *Common English Bible*

⁸ Romans 8:35-39, *Common English Bible*