

Sermon Preached on
Day of Pentecost (Whitsunday)
(May 15, 2016)
"Soft Spirit"

I have a confession to make. When I gave our secretary Dyan this sermon title, I had no idea what it meant. Actually, I hadn't even given the title a thought: you see, I was out of town Tuesday and Wednesday. Thursday was just a very busy day, and by the end of it, I wasn't feeling well. By Friday morning, I was so sick I had to stay home in bed. So when Dyan called looking for a sermon title, I really could not have cared less about it and said the first thing that popped into my head. Soft Spirit.

Where it came from, I couldn't say.

And then, lying in bed with a fever, I had this nightmare. Okay, not a real nightmare, just the realization that now I had to make a sermon fit this title that had no meaning.

I mean, the Holy Spirit isn't soft. It's scary. Here's how scary it is. Thursday morning, I read the story of Pentecost to the Nursery School kids. When I showed them a picture of the tongues of fire resting on the disciples, one of the kids yells, "Stop, Drop, and Roll!"

The reading in Acts says the Holy Spirit came in with the rush of a violent wind, the kind a Midwesterner like me associates with tornados. There's nothing soft about that.

And we all know that when the disciples began preaching about Jesus and his amazing love for all of us, preaching it to all people in all languages - they got arrested, beaten and all too often murdered.

The Holy Spirit is wild, untamable, powerful, and very dangerous.

But it's funny how these things work out. A little bit after hanging up, opened my e-mail. I have a subscription to a daily meditation, and that day's meditation was a poem by the 19th century poet, Christina Rossetti:

Who has seen the wind?
Neither I nor you:
But when the leaves hang trembling
The wind is passing thro'.
Who has seen the wind?
Neither you nor I:
But when the trees bow down their heads
The wind is passing by.

Christina Rossetti
Source: 365 Poems for Every Occasion

The Spirit can be a rushing wind or a gentle breeze. We see neither, and the breeze is barely felt except for its impact on us. But it's there.

We forget - well I forget - that the work of the Holy Spirit is not always flashy. That the Spirit whispers more often than shouts. We forget the prophet Elijah who could not hear the voice of God in earthquakes or storms or raging fire but in the still soft voice of the Spirit.

We forget - or maybe never knew - that the Spirit is the one person of the Trinity so unknowable we don't know if it's wind, bird, or flame. We can't even fix a gender to it. In fact, while the Rite II version of the Nicene Creed calls the Spirit "he", all previous English versions said "who." And in the Hebrew they say "she".

I'd guess what scares us most about the Spirit is that we can't pin her down. Think about it, aside from that big dramatic event on Pentecost, the event that gave birth to the church, the Spirit has done most of her work quietly, maybe even unnoticeably.

As a modest example, Cliff Wells and I were reminiscing the other day about when I was interviewing for the position of rector here. You see, I did not want to come here. I lived in a cute little town in North Carolina with nice people at a church that was really turning itself around. In fact, when I received St. James's parish profile, I threw it in the garbage. I won't go into how I ended up at the interview, but suffice to say, I came only to be polite before wishing St. James' well and moving on. The funny thing is, the search committee came prepared to do the same thing. All the other candidates had withdrawn, and they were not going to be stuck with the last guy left.

So when we got together, we were all polite and a little tense. But somewhere in there, things started to change - I couldn't begin to guess where - and by the end of the evening we were no longer talking about "if" we came to St. James' but "when". At the end, I remember turning to Liz and saying, almost in shock, "We're coming here." And she - all calm - said, "I know."

I've always believed - and I think the same is true for Cliff - that this gentle, almost imperceptible nudge toward each other was the work of the Holy Spirit, that soft spirit we celebrate today. Mind you, there've been plenty of times when I suspected the Spirit was guiding me, and I chose not to listen. The Spirit will not take us where we refuse to go.

Still - and here's my other point - Soft does not mean powerless. The power of the Spirit has never been one of physical force, of dominance over others. That's the world, not God. The apostles never harmed - they, like Jesus, fed the hungry, healed the sick, opened their arms to the despised, preached good news to the despairing. They broke down walls that divide and went about the work of knitting us together into the family of God.

So, when we find ourselves inclined toward what is loving and good - even if it's not what we imagined or wanted - perhaps we can stop and listen for that still, soft voice. Because the Spirit may speak with a soft voice, but when we listen, powerful things can happen.

Today is Pentecost in all its red, fiery, gusty, bird-like glory, the birthday of the church. The funny thing is, the best way to celebrate is to quiet down and listen. And let that soft spirit speak. Amen.