

## “Spirit”

Isaiah 42:5-9; Acts 2:1-11

June 9, 2019

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We're reflecting today on the Pentecost hymn "Spirit." This relatively new hymn (written less than 50 years ago) is one that many of us find quite stirring, but I couldn't have said exactly why... that is, until I spend some time listening closely to it. This hymn is a prayer addressed to the third person of the Trinity, the face of God we name "the Holy Spirit."

You can see right away that there are two distinct parts to this hymn-prayer:

There are the verses, in which are a brief history of the presence and power, the mission and movement of God's Spirit in the world, from the creation into a yet-unknown future. It's kind of an affirmation of faith in prayer form, sort of like some of the Psalms and other passages from the Hebrew Bible which recount God's past help for God's people, while expressing the hope that God will continue to provide and protect them.

And there is the refrain, which is a much more immediate and urgent and personal prayer, almost of yearning to feel the wind and might of the Spirit.

When we read the Pentecost story, or contemplate a visual representation of it, it can be hard to put ourselves in the place of those disciples, difficult to image what that rush of wind and flash of flame might have been like for them.

But I wonder if it maybe was just as hard for them, in that upstairs room, caught between their life-changing time with Jesus and their uncertainty about the future, to imagine what it was like when the Spirit moved over the water,  
coaxed up the mountains,  
led the Israelites through the desert  
inspired the prophets' words and courage.

They'd heard those stories, of course. Knew them as well as we know the stories of Jesus. But they were stories of another time, of other people.

It seems harder, somehow, to picture God's Spirit doing amazing things in the present than in a time we know only from the iconic and often strange stories that have been handed down to us. It's so much harder to recognize the Spirit here, in our midst, than in the lives of the past.

But I think that therein lies the power of this song. It helps us to stand with those disciples in that upper room and look both back to the past and forward to the future. It affirms that all those stories, and our story, and the stories yet to come, are part of one story.

Remembering is important because it connects us with, grounds us in, this story of our faith. A defining characteristic of Christianity (like Judaism) is that it is a historical faith and a communal faith. Ethereal, other-worldly, and abstract spirituality is not our calling. Private, individualized, or strictly interior faith isn't who we are. The God we believe in is not disinterested or distant, but deeply engaged in the life of the world and the creatures she gave life to.

Looking to the future is important, too, because we have hope. No matter how bleak things look, we have hope that rests in the conviction that God's Spirit continues to work and will not abandon the work, or us. The story is not over.

Past, present... but NOW is important, too. And it seems to me that the prayer expressed in the refrain of this hymn is a prayer for *now*. But it is not a prayer to be prayed lightly. Yes, the Spirit is gentle (so we know we can ask without fear), but inviting God's Spirit to blow through the wildernesses of our lives and our world is no small thing.

The Spirit of God is *free* – in other words, not bound to any expectations we might have or any limits we have been used to. And something else we know (from all those stories!) is that the Spirit doesn't just do her thing, but sweeps people up into the vision. God's Spirit calls us to participate.

Do we really want to ask to be stirred from our placidness by the restless Spirit of God? Are we ready for that?

I confess I can't sing this hymn without a little hesitation; I mean, I sort of *like* placidness.

But then, there are the wildernesses, those places of desolation we find ourselves in from time to time in this life.

It might be the frighteningly blank space of an unknown future when facing illness or major life changes.

It might be the emptiness that follows a loss or a devastating disappointment.

It might be the uncharted territory that lies ahead for the church; the part of the American population belonging to a church has declined 20 per cent in the last 20 years; none of us knows what this means.

It might be the terrifying vista that is the state of our world – now a merciless place for the vulnerable, the human community unstable with hate and inequality, the planet threatened by greed and carelessness, the problems seemingly unsolvable.

It might be the lostness we feel when we can't discern our direction, or even our own needs.

It might be a wilderness of the soul... when God seems absent or far away, when faith seems impossible.

It might be the places where we struggle with demons ... anxiety, addiction, trauma, regret, anger, despair.

Little adjustments, minor fixes, band-aid cures are no good in the face of such things.

We need the hope and power of the restless, calling, healing, freeing, transforming, life-giving, surprising Spirit.

So we need the stories, and the prayer, that "Spirit" expresses for us on this Pentecost Sunday. Even if it turns out that what we are asking for changes or challenges us, even as it stirs us up and heals us.

Let's be bold enough to sing it, and mean it.

### **"Spirit"**

Refrain: Spirit, Spirit of gentleness.

Blow through the wilderness, calling and free.

Spirit, Spirit of restlessness. Stir me from placidness.

Wind, wind on the sea.

1. You moved on the waters, You called to the deep,  
Then You coaxed up the mountains. From the valley of sleep,  
And over the eons You called to each thing,  
"Awake from your slumbers and rise on your wings."
2. You swept through the dessert, You stung with the sand,  
And You gifted your people With a law and a land,  
And when they were blinded With their idols and lies,  
Then You spoke through Your prophets To open their eyes.
3. You sang in a stable, You cried from a hill,  
Then You whispered in silence When the whole world was still,  
And down in the city You called once again  
When You blew through Your people On the rush of the wind.
4. 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.