

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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Pentecost Sunday
Acts 2:1-21

Signs of the Spirit

How do you know that the Holy Spirit is present?

Something happened on that Pentecost day when Jesus' disciples were motivated by something weird and wonderful to go out and proclaim God's wondrous deeds. They all told of it afterwards. The best they could do to describe it was that it started with a rush of a violent wind which entered the house. And then the wind was transformed into tongues of flame which sat on each one of them. They had no other way to describe it, so they called it "Holy Spirit."

They knew for sure that God's Spirit was present that day. They had wind and fire as signs. But I wonder, and maybe you do, too—how do we know the Spirit's presence with us today?

The Spirit is found throughout the Bible, beginning with Genesis 1. "A wind from God swept over the face of the waters" can also be translated, "God's Spirit brooded like a bird over the watery abyss." (Genesis 1:2, *The Message*) When David was anointed king, he received God's Spirit. (1 Sam 16:13) The psalmist spoke of God's creative spirit (Ps 104:30) and the prophet Isaiah named "the spirit of the Lord" as the source of wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and the fear of the Lord. (Is 11:2) Jesus told Nicodemus, "the wind blows where it wills." (Jn 3:8) He told the woman at the well, "God is Spirit." (Jn 4:24) And he assured his disciples, "The Holy Spirit will teach you everything." (Jn 14:26) But still, how can we know that it is the Spirit which is stirring us or comforting us, motivating us or counseling us, and not just something we ate for dinner, heard on the radio, or read on the internet? What are the signs of God's Holy Spirit?

If we wait around for tongues of flame, mighty winds, or descending doves, I suspect we will be disappointed. We need some other indicators to be able to recognize the Spirit in today's world. But today's wondrous story points us in the right direction. If we listen to it carefully, we'll know where to direct our attention.

A week ago yesterday, I returned from our church's adult mission trip with seven others. You may be aware that this year, there were some discouraging signs in the weeks before we departed. The mission agency on the Ft. Peck Reservation, where we were planning to do some hands-on labor and service, unexpectedly closed down. We knew that the work we had started in previous years, making a record of the graves in one of the Dakota Presbyterian church cemeteries, needed to be completed, but that didn't seem like enough to fill up the week. And we thought we were a bit weary of that kind of work. To some, it didn't feel enough like what we thought was "mission."

On the other hand, it was what the church there had asked us to do. And we had developed a set of skills to do it. They felt a need for it, and we had planned for the time. So eight of us went, traveling more than 400 miles across Montana, plans in hand.

The first sign of the Holy Spirit's presence was the vision which motivated us. "Your young men shall see visions, and your old men will dream dreams," quoted Peter from the prophet Joel. It was Patrick Pipe, who was an active member of this congregation while a student at MSU, who showed us the Spirit's presence in his vision 5 years ago. Shortly before returning to his tribal home in Poplar, he

said to me, “Our Dakota Presbyterian churches need help. Our cemeteries are not being cared for. You should bring a group of people on a mission trip to help out. And we could share our culture, and offer our hospitality.” Then, a Dakota elder, Leonard Crowbelt, added his dream to Patrick’s. “Help us make a record of who is buried where. It’s only in our heads, and we won’t be here forever.” Their vision meshed with my vision of building understanding between Native and non-Native peoples in our state, Christ’s ministry of reconciliation. So despite the discouragement we felt in mid-May this year, the vision endured.

The Holy Spirit gives us a vision of God’s future, which is tested and verified by its resonance with the rest of the story, the message of God’s love for the world expressed in Jesus Christ. The vision was a sign.

The second sign of the Holy Spirit’s presence was the gift of being able to cross boundaries and communicate with people of other cultures. “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability,” says the scripture. Now, let’s be clear. Native peoples of the 21st century in the United States cross those boundaries all the time. Their traditional languages are endangered. They speak English all the time. They also “speak” the ways of the dominant culture. But for those of us whose culture is the dominant culture, crossing in the other direction to learn another culture requires some humility. We have to admit we don’t know everything. We have to listen well before we speak. The gracious welcome of our hosts on the Ft. Peck Reservation facilitated our sojourn in another culture. Our return for a fifth time expressed our seriousness and respect. And they honored us by trusting us with some of their stories.

The Holy Spirit is a unifying Spirit, which embraces diversity and shows God’s intentions for the reconciliation of the world. Division is a human solution to difference; discovering our common humanity while appreciating our differences is the Spirit’s work.

A third sign of the Holy Spirit’s presence for us was the wonder we saw and felt while there. Wonder—at the holiness and peace of the cemetery, lovingly decorated with colorful flowers which the wind gently—and sometimes blusteringly—blew. Wonder—at the glorious singing of meadowlarks and the marvelous expanse of the prairie. Wonder—that we could also spend an entire day inside, processing data at our laptops, and feel satisfied at the end of the day that we had done God’s work. Wonder—on the part of Dakota church members when they saw the six large notebooks of cemetery documentation we were giving them, and understood that the labor those notebooks represented was a labor of love, a gift of time given sacrificially. “All were amazed and perplexed,” the scripture says, “though others sneered and said ‘they are filled with new wine.’” There was no room for such cynicism, doubting the source of the gift. Given in love, it was received in love. In this world, that is a precious sight to behold.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth, who opens eyes to see the wonder of God’s realm in the world. We can know the Holy Spirit is present when we experience awe and wonder, and see God at work.

What are the signs of the Holy Spirit? Sometimes I think we expect to always feel God in us, and when we lack that feeling, we conclude that God is not there and maybe never was. But feelings are fickle and feeble. The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans, says emphatically, “Nothing can separate

us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom 8:31-39) He also says that when we do not know how to pray as we ought, the Spirit steps in and prays for us “with sighs too deep for words.” (Rom 8:26) It is not just at the high points of our journey in faith that the Spirit is present. The Spirit is in the relationship between God and Christ, and upholding us, God’s beloved children, in relationship. And the relationship is Love. Poet Steve Garnaas-Holmes says it like this:

Nothing can separate you from the love of God.

You are in it like the air, like gravity.

It is in you, for it is what you are made of.

It’s for you. On purpose. With delight.

Nothing can separate you from the love of God.

(Unfoldinglight, 06/06/2019)

My friends, it is not necessary to travel on a mission trip to see the signs of God’s Holy Spirit. The Spirit is here with us when we are filled with passion for God’s truth, God’s justice, God’s compassion. The Spirit is with us when we discover the words to share God’s love for the poor, God’s freedom for the oppressed, God’s hope for those who are discouraged by the world’s meanness. The Spirit is with us when we receive courage to reach out beyond ourselves and proclaim God’s salvation in Jesus Christ. The Spirit is God’s way of being in the world, in the body of Christ, and in Christ’s disciples.

How do we know the presence of the Holy Spirit? The stories of scripture and the witness of Christian people across the centuries are more than enough to open our senses and alert us to how the Spirit is manifest. But it doesn’t stop there. For when the Holy Spirit is present, we become the ones who act by its power and bear our own witness to those around us and to the generations who follow us. The “Acts of the Apostles” is a story which continued for centuries, and is still being written. By you, and me, and us together. By Christ’s people in Poplar, Montana and Pretoria, South Africa and Pune, India. By old and young, rich and poor, men and women and everyone who loves Jesus. The Holy Spirit is here, ready to surprise and motivate us in Christ’s ministry.

Come, Holy Spirit! Renew the whole creation!

Come, Holy Spirit! Renew us in your love!

Come, Holy Spirit! Renew us with your power!

Now to the One who by the power at work in us is able to do far more than we imagine or think, to God be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, now and forever!