

Two different parishioners sent me memes about the Holy Spirit this week. One looked to be a coyote who had been in a windstorm or run through the rinse and dry cycles. It read, "How you look leaving a situation the Holy Spirit clearly told you not to get involved in." The other was two tree frogs: one was hanging on to the limb while the other had gripped the lips shut of the one hanging on the limb. Pointing to the frog hanging, it read, "Me, about to comment on a post." And above the other frog, it read: "The Holy Spirit." All joking aside the Holy Spirit tends to be an afterthought for many Christians. We don't really "have the Spirit" or "we aren't Pentecostals" at least that's what we tell ourselves. Truth be told many of us wonder what the Spirit is doing today in our lives. "It is one thing to read about what the Spirit of God did in the first century. But is that Spirit alive and at work today and in what ways is the Spirit present with us" (Clayton Schmidt, *FOW*)? Today we celebrate Pentecost, the 50th day after Easter and thus, the last day of the Easter season, which was first a Jewish festival celebrating the spring harvest. Today when many of us think of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is center stage, rushing like a violent wind through the early church and inflaming the hearts of Jesus' believers. Ok, it's not fair for me to assume so let me ask. "What images and actions do you associate with the Holy Spirit? Does the third person of the Trinity make you think of doves? Wind? Fire? When you anticipate the Spirit's activity in the world, do you imagine people speaking in tongues? Confessing their sins? Discerning new callings? Preaching with renewed vigor" (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net)? Or at work like a refiner's fire: leaving you ruffled up like the coyote in the meme or having your mouth held

shut to keep you from saying something stupid? In Acts, the Spirit descends upon 120 believers in Jerusalem on the fiftieth day after Jesus' resurrection and empowers them to testify to Jesus' impact on their lives, emboldens Peter to preach to a bewildered crowd of skeptics, and draws 3000 converts to the fledging faith in one day. "By any stretch of the imagination, it's a fabulous story, full of riveting details. Tongues of fire. Rushing winds. Accusations of drunkenness. Mass baptisms. It's easy to get lost in the noise and in the spectacle" (Thomas). You can see why for us as followers of Jesus, Pentecost marks the birthday of the church. While Luke's account of the first Pentecost may draw much attention, Paul, in Romans 8, offers a wonderful alternative exploration of the Spirit's work. Romans 8 imagines another form of Spirit speak, an additional Pentecost experience. Because when "all those words are inadequate, when all that speaking cannot express what is deepest within us, the Spirit intercedes on our behalf with wordless, inexpressible groans" (Audrey West, workingpreacher.org). While some of us may only think of God's Spirit as this violent wind or big, dancing flames of fire, Holy Ghost party, I must confess that today I prefer Paul's softer breeze or candlelit, intimate view of the Holy Spirit here in Romans 8. Selfishly, I feel like in this topsy-turvy, groaning world, I need to hear this view of God's Spirit right now. Before we turn to God's word for us this day, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.**

Paul waxes poetic in his gentle and moving description of the Advocate Jesus sends us: the third person of the Trinity: the Holy Spirit. Yes, the Spirit of the risen Christ is available to all now, and Paul describes the ongoing reality of life in the Spirit. However, Paul clarifies that the full

realization of our redemption still lies in the future. In other words, it is true that we are saved, but we are saved in the hope of redemption. Theologians call this the already but not yet. Paul writes in detail about how the Holy Spirit hovers over two equally true realities: “On the one hand, our adoption papers have already been served; we have a place in the family of God. Together with the whole of creation, already we are caught up as siblings in Christ. At the same time, although the adoption is final, life on this side of the second coming still is characterized by suffering, not only for us but for the whole of creation. Paul names creation’s suffering by comparing it to the groans of a woman in labor” (West). Think about how we see creation suffering today: Global warming, the devastation of war, the pollution-dumping industry, or any of the other myriad ways that the earth groans under human bondage to sin. “The entire creation is groaning because it still experiences the detrimental effects of people behaving as though the God of all creation has no claim on their lives whatsoever. We, too, suffer in large and small ways inwardly groaning while we wait for the fulfillment of our adoption- inwardly groaning while we yearn for full participation in God’s restored creation. And notice that even the Spirit groans with us, as she intercedes for us in our weaknesses and “gives voice to our deepest longings. This shared ‘groaning’ is testimony that God is present in the midst of our greatest need, even when we do not have the words to name it” (West). After last week’s sermon when I talked about unlikely friendships and cited the examples of the two Israeli/Palestinian groups that meet together, a few people came to me- one in particular- saying that at one point in the sermon he wanted to

yell out “but what about the genocide of 35,000 Palestinians?!” I heard his voice crack and get louder, and I could see his anguish and anger, as I did the others who expressed terrible concern. And then I had another express the hurt from their loved ones experiencing anti-semitism, and I could also hear their anguish and anger. War is awful. It is unfair. It claims too many innocent lives. I definitely don’t have the answers, and I don’t have the words to name my own grief and turmoil with the war in Gaza. This is another reminder that we live in the light of a good promise; not yet in the fulfillment of that promise. That evening I didn’t know how to pray, yet I took comfort in knowing that the Holy Spirit helps me in my weakness- just like she does for each of us. Even in the most private prayer sometimes we are unable to utter what we wish to communicate to God. So the Spirit intercedes for all the bondage, decay, groans, pains, frustrations, and futility of the whole creation. In Paul’s view, the Spirit comes to help, yet it is to “help us name those needs and desires too deep for words. The whole world- including those filled with the Spirit, Paul makes clear- groans with anticipation and struggle as we wait. The Spirit helps us to name these pangs, but doesn’t alleviate them” (David Lose, workingpreacher.org). To all this overwhelming groaning in all of creation I keep saying, “I wish I had a magic wand and could make it all better.” I know it’s a lame response, as I’m not God, and yet it’s what I really ache for.

And that is why- standing at the center of this text- is hope. That’s right- this groaning Spirit becomes the culmination of our hope. Biblical hope is waiting for the release of tension. The Spirit who endures suffering and simultaneously offers us a foretaste of resurrection life makes sure

that we are remembered before God. Because we don't have magic wands to make the world all better. But we can have hope in a God who can and will eventually restore all of creation, even those of us who have lost all hope but dare not admit it. "Whatever the circumstances- financial crises, broken relationships, devastating illnesses, unending losses and disappointments- some of us may find that we have landed in a place where there is not one ounce of strength left to endure what is before us. For all of us- the promise of God is a lifeline: when we cannot hope for ourselves, the Spirit hopes on our behalf, the church endures with us, the whole creation groans in solidarity. We are not alone" (West). It's what the former bishop of the Methodist Church in South Africa during apartheid, Peter Storey, calls "the great nevertheless of God." "Even while surrounded by the strong-armed agents of repression, Storey knew that the Holy Spirit was active in his nation. The government had all the power; nevertheless, God was with the poor in South Africa. The South African regime did not hesitate to use force in order to stop rebellion; nevertheless, Storey along with Desmond Tutu and others led the black South Africans in a peaceful revolution. In the end, there was a strong temptation to retaliate; nevertheless, God gave them a means of forgiving enemies and forming a reconciled nation. No matter what the odds, if God is in something, no obstacle can block the nevertheless of God" (Schmidt). I don't know about y'all but knowing that the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words: a sign that the Spirit is present in our midst- makes it possible for me to endure. I need to be reminded of the nevertheless of God. What about for you?

In Paul's view, the Spirit's work is "to continually transform human life-together with all creation- into the fullness of God's intentions. This process is painful and often messy, as the image of the creation in labor pains implies. The gift of new life is beautiful, and it often emerges out of struggle. Please don't hear me saying that God causes the struggle. No. God is with us in the struggle. Our text's affirmation that God is not yet finished with the whole world resonates with our experiences, opening up space for our collective groaning and longing for something better. It also gives us hope that we are not on our own in the struggle- God's Spirit is groaning right along with us, expressing our pain, fears, disappointments, and dreams to God as petitions too deep for us to put into words" (Jennifer Veja Pietz, workingpreacher.org).

Yes, today is Pentecost- a day in the life of the church where we celebrate the work of the Holy Spirit among us. "A true Pentecost lets the Spirit be the Spirit. A true Pentecost makes space for the Spirit's disruption, or rather, realizes after the fact that the Spirit insisted on the space for her disturbance. A true Pentecost sits in the disorder that is often the life of faith- like in Paul's view of our inability to speak of the grace we know to be ours- this true Pentecost believes that the Spirit will indeed show herself, not always on our time, not always to our liking, but, nevertheless, always" (Karoline Lewis, workingpreacher.org).

Paul assures us that the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives. And especially in the midst of our groaning, I think it's more than ok to recognize there are celebratory times as well in life when we feel like

having a Holy Ghost party as well! So whether God's Spirit is gifting us with joy or interceding to God on our behalf with sighs too deep for words, we say with hope and in trust, come, Holy Spirit, come! Amen