
Pentecost, Baptism, and the Holy Spirit

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa
The Day of Pentecost

As you may have gathered from the Gospel being proclaimed in different languages, from the red we're wearing, from these flowers that look like flames, or from these young children wearing white (or more red!), who got their parents here early enough to sit up front, there is something special about today. It's the feast of Pentecost!

Over the last fifty days of the church year, we have heard about the disciples discovering Jesus' empty tomb three days after his crucifixion; and about the resurrected Jesus appearing to them, in various ways and places, and then ascending into heaven—but not without promising first that there would be another in his place, here, with them: the *paraclete*—or the *holy advocate*, or *comforter*, or *companion*. And not without first breathing this Holy Spirit into them and sending them out in the world to continue his mission of forgiving, reconciling, proclaiming the good news.

Had you been there, you might describe the Holy Spirit as quiet, gentle, comforting, renewing, like the life-giving breath that God breathed into Adam at the very beginning.

But if you had been among the disciples fifty days later, for the Jewish Pentecost, the Feast of Weeks, when the Spirit poured on them from heaven, or if you'd been one of the festival pilgrims who heard and understood them speaking in different languages, you might say that the Spirit is bewildering. Wild. Chaotic. Loud. Like a violent wind, or tongues of fire.

Then again, if you had been at Jesus' baptism in the river Jordan, you might say it's like a dove, descending from heaven, with God's blessing, "You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Or if you're a student of the apostle Paul, you might call it a power: the power of Christ, strengthening your inner being; grounding you in love; accomplishing in you and others more than you can ask or imagine; binding you to people you may hardly know, but love and are loved by, nonetheless.

We have other words and images to add to this catalogue, don't we? If you've been here for Evensong, you might recognize it as the peace that envelops you as you listen to our choir sing. Or if you attend Bible study, you might say it's like sparks flying in conversation, or like a veil falling away when you suddenly understand something new or see more clearly.

In a typical week here at the Cathedral, you will see it breathe new life into broken hearts and relationships; companion people in difficult times; comfort the dying and grieving; build the most amazing communities; and inspire the most amazing acts of service, kindness, and generosity.

With so many images and experiences, it would be a fool's errand to try to offer you a singular, definitive definition of the Holy Spirit—though preachers are rarely deterred by that. Fortunately for you, today is not about pinning the Spirit down, but rather watching it blow among us. Recognizing it. Receiving it. Celebrating it.

That is what we do on Pentecost: we celebrate and receive the Holy Spirit. That is why we baptize today, too. Just watch and listen for the Holy Spirit in holy baptism!

In a few minutes, you'll see it embolden parents and godparents to present these children and make bold promises on their behalf. And because we are one in the Spirit, we will all stand and promise to support them in their life in Christ; and we will pray for them to be filled with and sustained by God's holy and life-giving spirit, and to learn to love others in that Spirit.

Then, then, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we will bless water and pour it over these children's heads, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of—the Holy Spirit.

And then Dean Candler will dip his thumb in this chrism. (*Chrism*, like the title *Christ*, comes from the word for *anoint*.) And he will anoint the newly baptized, making the sign of the cross on their foreheads, and saying, "You are sealed by the holy spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever." Sealed. Marked. Forever. Wow!

This same week that we celebrate these baptisms, many are celebrating another rite of passage: graduation. I'm one of them! My youngest child graduated this weekend from high school, along with several youth in this parish. Today, with my last child leaving home, I'm grateful for the assurance that the Holy Spirit will go with her *and stay with me*.

Two weeks ago, our preacher for Youth Sunday was another senior, Charlie Long. At the end of his fine sermon, he prayed, "*Dear God, thank you... for your steady encouragement in this place I know I can always call home. Thank you for the lessons I have learned and friends I have made that I know I'll carry with me forever. I ask that you continue to guide and lead me in this next chapter of my life, and... to provide us the strength we need.*"

That is about the finest exposition of the Holy Spirit I've heard. And that is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in baptism: this assurance of home and community. This *forever* identity and belonging and strength. This confidence—this *knowing*—that God is with us and our loved ones, wherever we go and whatever we are going through.

When you are at the edge of a new unknown—when you don't know what to do, or who you are, or how you're going to make it—take a deep breath (remember, "spirit" is related to the word for "breath"), and retrace that cross on your forehead, and remember: you are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever. Remember: the Holy Spirit, holy breath, is in you and guiding you—and your child. Remember: you have an identity and dignity and community, a home, a power in Christ that will be with you, forever.