

THE WIND IS PASSING BY
Sermon for Easter 7A (Ascension Sunday) – Acts 1:6-14
LPC, 5/28/17

In today's lesson from the Book of Acts, before ascending into heaven, Jesus tells the disciples that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them. This sets them up for Pentecost, which we will celebrate next week. You remember Pentecost – with the great wind and the tongues of fire and the disciples speaking in many languages? Well, that's on the horizon. But what exactly is Jesus talking about today when he predicts the coming of the Holy Spirit?

If you've hung around church long enough you know that Christians refer to God as the Holy Trinity, which consists of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So we know at least this much about the Holy Spirit: that the Holy Spirit is God, along with the Father and the Son.

The Holy Spirit however tends to be the part of that formula that people have the most trouble conceptualizing. We get God the Father for the most part. We associate God the Father with the God of Creation, who covenants with Abraham and the people of Israel. And the Son is Jesus of Nazareth, whose exploits and teaching are described in the Four Gospels. Jesus is the incarnation of God as a human being, who died and rose again to show that God's love is stronger than death and will ultimately prevail.

Jesus died and rose, never to die again. So if he never died after that, where is he now? Well, as we hear today, forty days after the resurrection, Jesus was raised into heaven, to reign forever with the Father. This event is called the Ascension. It is always celebrated 40 days after Easter. Since Easter is always on a Sunday, 40 days always takes us to a Thursday. This year it fell on last Thursday and we read about it today.

Before Jesus departs in this way, he promises them the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God's abiding presence with the disciples, and with us.

Most of us have an idea of what God the Father and God the Son look like. What does the Holy Spirit look like? Some artists have depicted the Holy Spirit as a dove, based on Gospel descriptions that at Jesus' baptism the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus "like a dove," but obviously that's figurative language, not to be taken literally.

So, what does the Holy Spirit really look like?

The Holy Spirit has been compared to the wind. With that in mind, I'll share a famous poem by 19th-century Englishwoman, Christina Rossetti:

*Who has seen the wind?
Neither I nor you:
But when the leaves hang trembling,
The wind is passing through.*

*Who has seen the wind?
Neither you nor I:
But when the trees bow down their heads,
The wind is passing by.*

The Rev. Dr. Cynthia Byers Walter

Rossetti is saying that while no one can see the wind, everyone can see its effects. The same may be said of the Holy Spirit. We don't see the Holy Spirit, *per se*, but we see its effects.

Today at Lawrencefield Church we are celebrating many special things. First, we have baptisms. Mia Bella and MacKenzie, who happen to be cousins, are baptized today. We welcome them in to the family of God, just as they have already been welcomed into the Beihl and Carissimi and Reske families. We promise to raise them up among us as fellow members of the Body of Christ, the Church, loving and supporting and teaching them, that they may learn to, like the disciples of Jesus in the Acts story, devote themselves to prayer and a life of following Jesus. This happens through the activity of the Holy Spirit.

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Another thing we are doing today is recognizing and celebrating our 2017 graduates. These are people who once were tiny babies, like Mia Bella and MacKenzie, whom we have welcomed and raised up and loved and supported and taught, and who are, in their graduation, closer to responsible adulthood. This is a tender time for them, and we want them to know that, although they have passed this milestone, they will always be part of God's family, and part of our family. This too is an effect of the Holy Spirit.

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Today we also collect the proceeds of the United Thank Offering, which we have traditionally collected on the Sunday after Ascension. Thus, this year it happens to coincide with all these other celebrations. The United Thank Offering represents part of our attempt to respond to Jesus' call to thankfulness, generosity and service. Thankfulness, generosity and service are made manifest through the activity of the Holy Spirit.

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Today is also a civil holiday, part of Memorial Day weekend. On Memorial Day we remember those who gave their lives in the service of liberty. "Greater love hath no man than that he lay down his life for his friends." The Holy Spirit is active in the motivation to Christ-like self-sacrifice for the good of others, and also in our motivation to remember this sacrifice with gratitude and honor.

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We may not see the wind, but we see its effects. We don't see the Holy Spirit, but we see its effects. The Holy Spirit is much in evidence this morning at Lawrencefield Church. If you want to know what the Holy Spirit looks like, it looks like this.