

Pentecost
Acts 1:1-21

June 12th, 2011
“Wild Goose Chase”

the Rev. Michelle Slater

It was 2,000 years ago, and the disciples were gathered all together, about 120 of them, according to the book of Acts. They were there for a religious festival, the Jewish holiday of Pentecost, which comes exactly 50 days after the Passover. At Pentecost, the Jewish people celebrate the first fruits of the spring harvest. They also celebrate the giving of the Torah, the teachings, the way God wanted the Jewish people to live, to Moses on Mount Sinai. A double festival of thanksgiving, of food for body, and food for spirit and soul.

But that was not all Jesus' followers were there for. In the midst of this celebration and thanksgiving, the disciples were waiting with expectation. Wondering what they were going to do without Jesus, waiting for something, anything, to happen, as Jesus had promised before he went away again. Waiting in prayer and song and sharing, for the promise to be kept, although they had no idea what it would be like or when exactly it would arrive. Then, unexpectedly, it came: a mighty wind blew through the entire house, striking sparks that burst into flames above their heads, giving them the gift of speaking all the world's languages to speak of God's wondrous works.

It was the gift of the Holy Spirit, and it has puzzled and amazed us ever since. What on earth *is* the Holy Spirit? Classical Christian doctrine says the Spirit is the third “person” of the Trinity, one of the three “persons” of one “substance” that make up God, along with God the “Father” and God the “Son”. So there. Does that help? Probably not.

I'm not the first one to say that the Holy Spirit is the most mysterious and difficult aspect of God to understand or define. Most of us can at least begin to describe the other two: God the Father, the Creator of heaven and earth, who makes the sun to shine and the rain to fall. God the Son, who was human like us: our saviour, teacher, helper, and friend. But how would you describe God the Holy Spirit to the children in our congregation? Even Jesus had a hard time with that one. “The Spirit blows where it chooses,” he said in John's Gospel, “and you will hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from, or where it goes.”

In the Christian tradition, a lot of different images have been used to express the mystery and power of the Holy Spirit. The image of wind or breath reminds us of the Spirit moving on the waters, preparing for God's creating word. The image of fire speaks of the Spirit's power to purify us, the way fire refines precious metals. The image of water reminds us of our baptism, and of Jesus' assurance that from the believer's heart will flow “living water”.

And of course, there is the image of the dove, one of the most common and popular images of the Holy Spirit, that many of us have on our bulletin covers this morning. It reminds us of when Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, and the Holy Spirit descended on him “like a dove”. A symbol of purity and peace, innocence and gentleness, the Holy Spirit as dove works gently to persuade, to heal, to comfort, and to guide.

Yet the image of the Holy Spirit as a dove has always seemed a little...gutless, to me. So I was intrigued this week when I came across another image of the Holy Spirit, an image found in the Celtic tradition of Christianity. It's another bird image, in fact, but not the peaceful and serene dove landing on Jesus at his baptism. Their symbol of the Holy Spirit was the wild goose.

There's quite a difference between the two birds, I have found. Doves, I read, have been domesticated for about 3,000 years, are easy to raise, and gentle in nature. By now, they are no longer suited to live in the wild, since they can't survive on their own in most climates, have no natural fear of predators, and can't seem to distinguish natural foods. Without even the homing instinct of their close kin, the pigeons, a dove on its own in the wild is pretty vulnerable, a "dead duck" you might say.

Now wild geese, on the other hand, are, well, the opposite. Wild geese aren't gentle and biddable. They are not domesticated or controllable. You can't restrain a wild goose and make it do your will.

And if you've ever come across a flock of Canada Geese at Stanley Park, you know what a downright nuisance they can be. They're loud, raucous and aggressive – no sweet and safe, calm cooing here. A goose's honk is strong, challenging, strident and unnerving – and just a bit scary if it's waddling briskly toward your two-year-old, snapping its beak in his face. Far from being vulnerable, wild geese are keenly attentive to predators, and if threatened, will stand erect, spread their wings and hiss, and eventually charge, biting and attacking with their wings.

What is it about a wild goose that spoke to those ancient Celtic Christians? I imagine they noticed, as I have, that when the Spirit comes in the Bible, it is rarely sweet or safe. God's Spirit called the prophets to speak to Israel in words that were bold and sometimes dangerous, as well as being life-giving. Ezekiel saw a vision of God's Spirit blowing through a valley of dry bones and bringing them to life. John the Baptist, dressed in camel's hair and eating wild locusts, proclaimed, "I baptize you with water but he who comes after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

It was this Wild Goose that Jesus referred to when he preached his first sermon and quoted Isaiah, saying, "The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour."

And of course, just look at the radical nature of the coming of the Spirit in our text for today. At Pentecost, the disciples experienced the Spirit as "a sound like the rush of a violent wind" and "divided tongues as of fire." No "still small voice" or a heart strangely warmed here! Nothing safe and sweet about this coming of the Spirit. This Spirit is wild, noisy, unpredictable and even dangerous.

So what did it mean, then, for those disciples 2,000 years ago, to be given this dangerous, demanding and unsettling gift? I suppose the first thing it meant was that they had a new identity and a new mission. They came into the room as individual disciples, and left it a church.

And not just a church to “belong” to, but a church defined by its purpose: to tell others of the wondrous works of God. To share the healing, forgiveness and transformation they had experienced with others.

It means the same for us, disciples as we are, 2,000 years later, on this Pentecost celebration. We remember today our own initiation into the faith, our own formation into this part of the church. And we are reminded of our mission, nothing simpler than this: to invite others into the great Wild Goose chase.

It’s not a chase where we do the chasing, running after the Holy Spirit, trying vainly to domesticate and control and understand what the Spirit is doing. Rather, we are the ones being chased, don’t you think? Rather than a meek and mild dove at work in us, the Holy Spirit is a wild goose chasing us into an unknown future, a future only God can imagine and lead us toward, giving us all that we need for the journey.

Demanding, unsettling, noisy and uncontrollable...who among us would willingly welcome the Wild Goose? Not many of us, some days. That’s why, I think, the gift comes not to one at a time, but to the disciples all together. They receive it together, because it is a gift of power to the entire community. So when one is doubting, wondering, afraid to welcome that loud, chaotic and unpredictable Spirit in, the rest of the faith community can welcome the power for them, and share it with them when they are ready for the great Wild Goose chase.

I can just imagine how risky, how unpredictable, and yet how energizing and life-giving, that first service of the United Church of Canada was, 86 years ago. 10,000 people gathered in the Mutual Street Arena in Toronto, as the Wild Goose chased those three denominations into giving up their previous identities and traditions, and risk a completely new life together.

I pray that what happened that day, when our ancestors in the faith gave up all they knew to come together in a new way to worship God, as the United Church of Canada, will happen again for us, this day and every day. That in our own days of wondering, of listening, of paying attention to the new things God is doing in us...and our congregation...and the United Church on the West Side of Vancouver... the Holy Spirit, the Wild Goose, will swoop in and out among us. Knitting us together through the songs we sing, the prayers we pray, the breaths we breathe together. That God will create the space, again and again, for us to hear that wild and exhilarating call. That God will help us to breathe in the courage to go where the Wild Goose is chasing us, and even to welcome the chaos and disarray that she brings, trusting that she brings us, always, life and life abundant.

May it be so for us! Amen.