

TERMS OF ENDEARMENT

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Pentecost Sunday, May 15, 2016

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Two Quotes from *The Hand of God**

Good morning to you all once again, and happy Pentecost. I'd like to begin with three quotes. The first one is from Annie Dillard, a marvelous author and essayist:

“It could be that God has not absconded but spread, as our vision and understanding of the universe have spread, to a fabric of spirit and sense so grand and subtle, so powerful in a new way, that we can only feel blindly of its hem.”

And then John Archibald Wheeler, a physicist and philosopher:

“Behind it all is surely an idea so simple, so beautiful, so compelling that when — in a decade, a century, or a millennium — we grasp it, we will say to each other, how could it have been otherwise? How could we have been so blind for so long?”

**See endnote, page 5.*

The Story of Pentecost

And then a third quotation is a revised version of the Pentecost story. You will have noticed that we only had one scripture reading. Typically, we have two. Here's the other one, but you will read a few changes in it. What has been done is to make the story more literal. (Adapted by Dov Treiman. Changes shown in italic type.)

This is from the second chapter of Acts, verses 1-12:

“¹ When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak *with great eloquence*, as the Spirit gave them ability.

“⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound, the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one *suddenly found the ability to understand Aramaic*. ⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all of us *who are listening, from distant lands?*’ ⁸ And how is it that we *understand*, each of us, *Aramaic, as if it were our native tongue?*’ ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs —

*we understand Aramaic as if it were our own languages, understanding them speaking about God's deeds of power.'*¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'

Back to Basics; Pentecost

My sermon this morning actually is very simple. It's a little bit of a back-to-basics kind of sermon.

Today is Pentecost, and in many ways, Pentecost is like the ugly stepchild of Christian holidays. We have Christmas and Easter, which get lots of attention, holidays from school, all that kind of good stuff, and then there's Pentecost. Another measure of it is in terms of theology books. For every million books about God, and every billion about Jesus Christ, there are only a couple dozen about the Spirit.

I was one of the very first to take a brand-new class at seminary on the theology of the Holy Spirit. We had one, count it, one textbook. The professor managed to find the only one that existed.

So back to basics. I'd like to remind you of four metaphors for the Holy Spirit on this Pentecost Sunday, two of them minor, two of them major.

Minor Metaphors for the Holy Spirit

Apologies on the first minor metaphor which has to do with booze. Yes, alcoholic drinks. You start off with grape juice, and you do absolutely nothing. You just let it sit there, and the fungal spores that are in the air, those same spores that you don't want to breathe when you're in a house that's been flooded with mold everywhere

— yes, that stuff — lands on our grape juice and does its thing.

But in the primitive mind, at the time that these metaphors were created, it was magical. Suddenly there's something in the liquid that has the ability to knock you onto your rear. It's invisible and it's powerful, and they, rather naturally, began to call such things "spirits." It's not a coincidence. Let's appreciate the metaphor for a moment: That something in the drink, something physical like a glass of grape juice, suddenly has power and is invisible. Yes, like the Holy Spirit. Metaphor number one.

Minor metaphor number two for the Holy Spirit, which has to do with the word "tincture." This is an old one that's not common at all, but I'm including it — and I'm leaving out a lot — because it's sort of cool, and I don't use that word very often.

The only tincture I knew about as a kid was tincture of iodine. So I scraped my knee and my mom would put this stuff on the scrape. It smarted like the dickens, but it kept the scrape from getting infected. And then there's tincture of Mercurochrome. Beautiful. I'm sitting there fascinated with that fluorescent color when mom would put that on my scrapes. That was something new and attractive.

That's all I knew about tincture, except when I'm taking old theology classes and reading old theology books, tincture was a metaphor for the Holy Spirit. I never quite got it until I looked it up. Ah hah! An etymological dictionary for the word "tincture":

Circa 1400, "a coloring or a dye," from the Latin *tinctus*, which means

“to dye.” Originally, merely “to moisten, to wet, to soak, to soak in color.”

So take a piece of paper towel. You’re at the kitchen sink, and you’ve got a small spill of water off to the side, and you take a corner of the paper towel and just touch it to that drop of water. You can see the liquid, the water go into the fibers of the paper towel. Or imagine back in your hippie days. You were making your very first tie-dyed tee shirt in the sink. You pull out the shirt, and it is soaked, dripping. That’s what the word means.

Once again, it’s not a bad metaphor for soaking into something. So the paper towel or the shirt is soaked in the dye or in the liquid. Similarly, now apply the process to spiritual matters, as you do with a metaphor.

So the bread for communion, dripping with Spirit, is soaked in the communion wine. But we don’t stop there. At this point people vary on how far they want to take it. But you look at a human being, soaked in the Spirit, dripping with it in this metaphor. And living things — a plant, an animal. So also, what we call the inanimate things — a mountain, a river, the world, our home — dripping, soaked in the spiritual realm, tincture.

So those are the two minor metaphors for the Holy Spirit.

Major Metaphors for the Holy Spirit

These are the ones that everybody knows. The first one is fire. Remember that the church — and it’s a little bit inappropriate to use the word “church” at this point because the disciples, the followers of Jesus hadn’t really become a church yet. At that

stage, after the crucifixion and resurrection and after the ascension but before the giving of the Spirit, they were afraid. They were under threat. After all, they saw what had happened to their leader, Jesus, and so the disciples were hiding. They were not even willing to go out. They were timid, afraid.

And then this Spirit comes with tongues as of fire, whatever that might mean. And so Pentecost was the event that energized them, turned them from scaredy-cats into bold, relentless, fearless people, out into the world.

But look at the way in which we use “fire” in our language. You have a political activist, and you say there is fire in his bones. You have a lazy committee, for which you selected people and asked them to do something. But they pretty much do nothing for a long time, and you realize that you need to light a fire under them.

Then there is passion in love, to quote Adele from “Rolling in the Deep”:

“There’s a fire starting in my heart,
reaching a fever pitch, it’s bringing
me out [of] the dark.”

You have a person who’s just sort of stagnant, and you need to get him fired up. We use that language for energy all the time, to get something moving and started.

And so therefore as a metaphor for the gift of the Spirit to the church, that was the event that energized them, that made them fearless and relentless and enthusiastic.

And now the final metaphor — wind, breath, air, spirit, the second of the two major metaphors for the Holy Spirit. So far you’ve got booze, you’ve got tincture,

you've got fire, and this is the one that's actually in the word itself — wind, breath, air, spirit.

So in Greek the word for spirit or air or wind is “pneuma,” from which we get a pneumatic hammer or pneumonia, having to do with your lungs, and then the Hebrew “ruach.” Ruach and pneuma mean identically the same thing, even though one comes from the Hebrew and the other one comes from the Greek.

In Genesis 2, verse 7:

“Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.”

Or the story of The Valley of Dry Bones in Ezekiel 37:9:

“Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.”

In John 20, one of the postresurrection appearances is in verse 22:

“And when he [Jesus] had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’ ”

Pneuma and ruach mean the same thing across the board — the air, the wind, the breath, the Spirit, the soul.

There's a Simplicity to It . . .

. . . And the beauty of it is that air and breath are literally all around us. They are literally within us, and they are linked to our lives. Stop breathing, and you aren't alive any more.

What is difficult for modern people, I believe, is that this is almost too simple. We try to make it more complex. The simplicity of this actually gets in the way of our apprehending it. Consider for a moment: Are you breathing? Then you are surrounded, infused, indeed soaked with the Spirit. For so many of us, we feel that God is distant, that God needs an appeal finally to come near and help the supplicant with his or her issues. But this is not true. Rather, God is as close as our breath.

The Marks of an Abundant Life

Are you breathing? Then God is around you, surrounding you, infusing you and you are soaked. You are dripping wet with it. It's a powerful metaphor if we let it do its work.

I've read in a number of places about the marks of an abundant life. You come across these things in a number of ways, but this one in particular just sort of caught my attention. It appealed to me.

The marks of an abundant life are threefold: energy, enthusiasm and empathy. You find a person who has energy, enthusiasm and empathy, and he or she is generally a contented person — a person out there doing something in the world in a positive way. Energy, enthusiasm, and empathy.

But note something about those three characteristics: They all begin with “en” or “em,” meaning something going into you. (“Em” is the same prefix as “en.”) The “urg” from energy is the dynamism, the power, the strength, the vitality going into you. The “thusiasm,” the “thu” root is the same as “theos,” God. Enthusiasm literally means “God in you.” Empathy, the pathos, the feeling, feeling with somebody, feeling

for somebody, being in touch with your own feeling nature, your own emotional nature into you. Feeling the pain of the world, the joy of the world into you.

Each and every one of these characteristics is a facet of what it is like to be soaked in God.

You Are Standing on Holy Ground

To repeat the quote from John Archibald Wheeler:

“Behind it all is surely an idea so simple, so beautiful, so compelling that when — in a decade, a century, or a millennium — we grasp it, we will say to each other, how could it have been otherwise? How could we have been so blind for so long?”*

To quote Jacob, one of the ancient Hebrew patriarchs (Genesis 28:16):

“Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it’ ”

So also, infused with the Holy Spirit, indeed dripping with it, we too have been standing on holy ground, and we did not know it. Except now we’re beginning to get a feeling for it.

Amen.

*** THE HAND OF GOD**

Thoughts and Images

Reflecting the Spirit of the Universe

Sharon Begley, Introduction

Michael Reagan, Editor

Annie Dillard, Contributor et alia

John Archibald Wheeler, Contributor et alia

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