

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Pesky Spirit!”

January 8, 2012

Reverend Art Ritter

Genesis 1: 1-5

1In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Mark 1: 4-11

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, ‘The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’

A travelling evangelist was fond of creating spectacular finales for his revival meetings. Coming to a church, he arranged for his usual climax by secreting in the rafters of the ceiling a small boy with a caged dove. At the height of his sermon, the preacher would shout for the Holy Ghost to come down, whereupon the dove was released to fly. At one particular service the moment came and fervent in his cry the preacher called out, “Holy Ghost, come down!” Nothing happened. Again he raised his arms to heaven and shouted at the top of his lungs, “Holy Ghost, come down!” Still nothing happened. In the hush of the still congregation, the boy hiding in the rafters poked his head out and called down to the evangelist, “Mister, the yellow cat has done ate the Holy Ghost. Shall I throw down the yellow cat?”

As we stand at the beginning of a New Year, it is a wonderful coincidence that the lectionary readings for this Sunday deal with the influence of the Holy Spirit. The hope of God’s promise to make all things new is essential to our life of faith. In the creation story from Genesis, a wind from God blows over the chaos and darkness of the waters, creating a new world. This wind is the life-giving, light-producing power of God. In the gospel reading from Mark, Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. On that day, at that time, the heavens opened up and the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus, empowering him to begin his ministry to the world. Jesus’ ministry begins, not in quiet deliberation, thoughtful planning and rational goal setting, but through fire, mystery, and power from heaven.

Spirit is a bit strange for us to fathom. It is too odd and exotic for our modern thinking, rational world. Talk of spirit is like a childhood fable read to sophisticated adults. In a patterned, predictable, human-centered world, we would rather take care of things ourselves with the things we can see, touch, trust, and understand. Trusting an invisible force such as Spirit seems much too risky.

It might be easy to compare the influence of the Holy Spirit to what happens out on a dance floor. Some people love to dance. They feel the beat. It is easy for their bodies to respond to the music, to flow effortlessly in perfect rhythm. Others, and I include myself in this category, enjoy the music, might even be able to tap their foot to the beat. We try to get the rest of our body moving appropriately. But all the while we are dancing we are concerned about looking awkward, out-of-place or out of control. Then there are others who remain seated during the dance. They are frightened by the possibility of embarrassment, threatened by the music, afraid of the situation. So it is with the Holy Spirit. Some can embrace its power. Some feel the power but resist its influence. Some ignore its power altogether.

William Willimon tells a story of when he was a young minister sent to a small church that had been, he was told, ravaged by a booming charismatic movement. The minister leaving the church told the younger minister that the charismatics were, "half-crazed fanatics who will tear a church apart with their fanaticism." Naturally, the young minister was worried about how he would fare with these Spirit-crazed fanatics. Concerned, he sought the counsel of a wise, old, retired pastor. The grizzled veteran listened and then responded thoughtfully, "People filled with the Holy Spirit? You're the lucky one. It's much easier to put out a fire than it is to raise the dead!" The older minister was right. Willimon found that it was easier to contain enthusiasm than it is to create it.

We as churches are often guilty of dousing the flames of new ideas and different approaches when we should be tossing kindling onto even the smallest of flames. The Holy Spirit is a transformative, transfiguring power so great that it has no comparison here on Earth. If we are so miraculously empowered, why does the church continue to come across like some 98-pound weakling on the beach? Could it be because so few of us have taken this power, unleashed it and released it into our lives? Although baptized in the Spirit, we are content to keep it caged up. It is odd how the church, the witness of Easter and Pentecost, can be so at home among the dead. It is so good to remember today that God still moves among us in the Holy Spirit!

James Harnish offers to us some concrete circumstances where the power of the Spirit needs to be most active. He asks, "Where do you find the power to hang in there in this world? Where do you find the power to believe in love in a world that is filled with hate? Where do we find the power to continue to work for peace in a world that is addicted to violence? Where do we find the power to continue to believe in good in a world that is filled with so much suffering and pain? Where do you find the power to be a disciple of Jesus in this world? The Spirit is nothing less than our enthusiasm for life that comes when we daily experience the near presence of God in our lives. It is the prodding that gets us here on Sunday; the whispering voice that moves us to God's service when we have other things to do with our time; the vision of God and the understanding of our purpose that stands behind and above all other things we might do in our lives and in our church; the proclamation, in word and deed, of God's reality in the midst of our present reality.

Henry Ford spoke about spirit in purely secular terms. If we remember that enthusiasm means, "in the Spirit," then his words can be applied to the power of the Holy Spirit for us as followers of Christ. He said, "You can do anything if you have enthusiasm. Enthusiasm is the yeast that makes your hopes rise to the stars. Enthusiasm is the spark in your eye, the swing in your gait, the grip of your hand, the irresistible surge of your will and your energy to execute your ideas. Enthusiasts are fighters, they have fortitude, and they have staying qualities.

Enthusiasm is at the bottom of all progress! With it, there is accomplishment. Without it, there are only alibis.”

Yes, it is easier to put out a fire than it is to raise the dead. God desires for all of us to at least have the pilot light of the Holy Spirit burning. We must be thankful that God still moves among us with the power and enthusiasm of the Holy Spirit. Because of that Spirit, we have promise and potential and purpose. As God’s people we are called to show a little enthusiasm, a little spirit, a little bit of the power of God which can work through us.