

How does the Holy Spirit come to you? In “a sound like the rush of a violent wind”—like a tornado, perhaps? Have you ever noticed “tongues, as of fire,” resting on your head or your hand or maybe your elbow? Have you ever received the ability to “speak in other languages,” without painstaking study and boring memorization? How does the Holy Spirit come to you?

Every year on the Festival of Pentecost, seven weeks after we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, we read the story of the Holy Spirit coming to the disciples, from the second chapter of Acts. After Jesus’ death and resurrection and ascension, the Holy Spirit, which Jesus had promised his disciples, shows up in three dazzling phenomena: violent wind, fiery tongues, and Peter’s Aramaic words heard in foreign languages. Has the Holy Spirit ever come to you in a way that you couldn’t ignore it?

In the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, the Spirit sometimes came in dazzling phenomena. To **Moses**, for example. How did the Spirit come to him? In a bush that “burned but was not consumed.” To the prophet **Balaam**. Do you remember his story? God spoke to him, and he didn’t listen, so God sent an angel to block his path, but he didn’t see the angel until his donkey spoke to him, at which point the Lord opened his eyes. Then there’s **Isaiah**, who gives us this description:

“I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.’ The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.”

Has the Spirit ever come to you in a burning bush or a declarative donkey or seraphs with six wings in a smoke-filled temple?

In the New Testament as well, the Spirit sometimes came in ways that could not be ignored. **Zechariah**, for example, lost his voice when he refused to believe that his wife Elizabeth would have a child. **Joseph** had a couple of angel visitors; one told him to “take Mary as [his] wife,” and the other to “take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt.” **Mary** herself got a visit from the angel Gabriel, who had astounding news for her. **Paul** was blinded by a light from heaven. **Peter** had a vision of a sheet filled with unclean animals. Has the Spirit ever come to you in such a way, a way that you couldn’t ignore?

Or perhaps the Spirit has come to you, not in dazzling phenomena, not in wind or fire or foreign languages, but, rather, in ways that you barely notice, as unobtrusive as breathing. Perhaps the Spirit has come to you quietly, even in silence, so that you hardly noticed it, or maybe even ignored it, at least at first. There’s scriptural precedent for that sort of coming of the Spirit as well. When **Elijah** was feeling depressed, the Spirit came, saying, according to various translators: “a gentle whisper; a soft, gentle voice; a whistling of a gentle air; a quiet, whispering voice; a gentle blowing.” Here’s a more familiar

translation: “a still, small voice.” After hearing that still, small voice, the prophet Elijah was instructed to “go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, [and wait for the Lord] to pass by.”

Listen to the account of the Holy Spirit’s coming to Elijah.

“Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.”

Have you experienced God’s presence in a sound of sheer silence? Has the Spirit come to you in a gentle whisper or a gentle blowing? Have you heard the still, small voice of the Lord?

In the gospel of John, we hear another account of God’s presence in “sheer silence.” It’s another version of the Pentecost story, the story of the giving of the Holy Spirit. Less familiar than today’s lesson from Acts, it can easily escape our notice, because there’s not even one dazzling phenomenon in it. In John’s account, instead of the noise of the wind and the fire and the foreign languages we encounter in Acts, Pentecost comes quietly. How does the Holy Spirit come in John? Simply, with breath, quiet breath, barely noticeable breath; we could call it a “gentle blowing” or a “still, small voice.”

Here’s John’s account of the coming of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus appeared to the ten disciples behind closed doors on Sunday evening after his resurrection,

“he showed [the disciples] his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”

Jesus gave the disciples the Holy Spirit simply by breathing on them. Unlike the rowdy, raucous experience that Acts records, the Pentecost in John’s gospel is quiet; the Spirit is given in “gentle blowing” or a “still, small voice” or “sheer silence.” It’s barely noticeable, almost inaudible.

Does the Holy Spirit come to you in sheer silence or in barely noticeable breath? In burning bush or smoky temple, in comforting dream or troubling vision? In signs in the sky or words in a song on the radio? In Holy Scripture or ancient hymns or contemporary Christian songs, in a gentle tug on your heart or a persistent prompting of your will? How does the Holy Spirit come to you?

And, when the Spirit comes, what does it say to you? What is the Spirit after? What does the Spirit call you to do? In the Pentecost account in Acts, the Spirit inspires the disciples to “speak about God’s deeds of power” so that people who speak other languages may hear and understand the good news of God’s love in Jesus, each in their native language. In the Pentecost account in John, Jesus breathes the Spirit into the disciples so they may take his peace into the world. In your life, the Spirit comes to bless you and to send you out so that you may go into the world to do God’s work, to tell of God’s love and to bring God’s peace.

Perhaps the Spirit prompts you to pray for a friend whom you've not seen for a long time or to write a note to a friend who is ill. To speak a kind word to a harried cashier or a busy bus driver. To reach out to a neighbor to volunteer to take their kids for an afternoon so they can have a break. To call a relative from whom you are estranged. To do your job faithfully or support your co-workers or bring a new idea to your boss. Maybe the Spirit is calling you to start looking for a new job or to prepare for retirement. What is the Spirit prompting you to do? What work is God sending you to do?

Whether the Spirit is shouting at you or whispering to you, it's your name that the Spirit is calling. Maybe the Spirit is nudging you about reaching out to a lonely classmate—or about a problem at work—or your volunteer responsibilities—or your vocational future—or your family life. On this Festival of the Day of Pentecost—and every day, the Spirit is here, among us, and inside you. So pay attention. Listen to the Spirit, in gentle breath or sheer silence, in raucous or rowdy persistence. Perceive the Spirit's guiding, and do the Spirit's bidding. And remember that, wherever God sends you, the Spirit accompanies you, silently or aloud, gently or firmly, noticeably or imperceptibly. AMEN