

The Rev. Joel Petruschke
Our Saviour/St. Stephen's

May 28, 2023
Pentecost

Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, something (you may or may not know about me by now/you may not have learned about me yet) is that I enjoy poetry.

And so, among my leisure reading, I like to like to include a book of poetry every now and new.

Poetry appeals to me because I am enthralled by a poet's ability to capture an image succinctly and beautifully in words.

As a preacher who is constantly writing sermons, and often including images in those sermons, I find reading poetry helpful in my own description of images.

And so today, I want to share with you one of my most favorite of images.

It is an image I come back to again and again, when I think about the Holy Spirit, this being the Sunday of Pentecost after all, the Sunday we focus specifically on the Holy Spirit.

The image derives from a poem by Wendell Berry, entitled *Elegy*.

Wendell Berry writes these words in the poem.

"The shape of the wind is a tree bending, spilling its birds."

Isn't that just lovely?

"The shape of the wind is a tree bending, spilling its birds."

Can you see that image in your mind?

A gust of wind intrudes upon a stationary tree in full leaf where a flock of black birds are roosting.

The tree branches arc, the direct result of the force of the breeze.

And the movement of the tree disturbs the birds there just enough that they take wing and fly away in mass, voicing their discontent as they go.

“The shape of the wind is a tree bending, spilling its birds.”

And, why I like that poetic line so much, and why I bring it up today on Pentecost, is because of the phrase, “The shape of the wind.”

PAUSE

The wind as we know is invisible, we don’t see it unless it is acting on something else.

Only then do we catch a glimpse of its shape.

The wind as we know is mysterious.

As it says in the Bible, in John 3:8, “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.”

Yes, Wendell Berry gives us such a beautiful line about the shape of the wind.

And it makes us wonder, perhaps...

It makes me wonder anyway, “What is the shape of the Spirit?”

How would we, for instance, finish this sentence: “The shape of the Spirit is...”

You need not respond to that question out loud.

But think to yourself... “The shape of the Spirit is...”

PAUSE

Now, we may know that the word for “wind” in the Old Testament is *ru’ah*.

And that Hebrew word *ru’ah* is not only translated as “wind,” but it is also translated as “spirit,” and as “breath.”

Ru’ah is wind, spirit, and breath.

In Genesis, at the dawn of creation, it is said that a wind moved over the face of the waters, and God began to create.

But it could also be said that a spirit moved over the face of the waters, or a breath moved over the face of the waters.

PAUSE

In the New Testament, it is the same thing.

One Greek word, *pneuma*, is used for the same three things—wind, breath, and spirit.

PAUSE

And, so when I hear Wendell Berry’s poetic line, “The shape of the wind is a tree bending, spilling its birds,” I wonder about the shape of the spirit, making the connection that in ancient Hebrew and ancient Greek, spirit and wind are really one and the same semantically.

Not the case, in English. We have three different words—wind, breath, and spirit.

Nonetheless, what is the shape of the Spirit?

Hopefully, by now, you have formed your own image in your mind.

And I want to share with you then, the image that formed in the mind of God, when God asked God’s self, when God finished that sentence: “What is the shape of the Spirit?”

Here it is.

The shape of the Spirit is the collection of God’s people empowered and sent forth to do the will of God in the world.

Let me say that again.

The shape of the Spirit, the image in the mind of God of the Spirit’s shape, is the collection of God’s people empowered and sent forth to do the will do God in the world.

I guess we could use more poetic language like Wendell Berry.

The shape of the Spirit is the church yielding to God’s grace, spilling its people.

That is the shape of the Spirit, at least it is in the mind of God.

You didn’t realize that today when you came to church you were going to be allowed a glimpse into the very thoughts of the divine.

But there it is.

Here is the mind of God at work, here is God’s answer to the shape of the Spirit.

It is here, right here in the church.

The shape of the Spirit is the collection of God's people empowered and sent forth to do the will of God in the world.

PAUSE

And this is exactly, EXACTLY, what we see happening on the Day of Pentecost long ago.

The disciples/the apostles were all together in one place.

And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where the apostles were sitting.

And the text says that all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.

And in response to their questions, "What does this mean? What just happened?"

In response to their questions, Peter explains the situation using the words of the prophet Joel, a prophet I tend to be a bit partial towards.

Peter quotes Joel saying, "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams."

In other words, the Spirit in this text blows in and shapes the gathering of individuals there into a collection of God's people who are empowered to do the will of God in the world, just as the prophet Joel said the Spirit would.

This is the gospel writer Luke's version of Pentecost.

And notice the Spirit is accompanied by the rush of a violent wind, again the connection being made that wind and Spirit both derive from the same Greek word, *pneuma*.

PAUSE

Now, in John's gospel, Pentecost is described differently.

There in John's gospel the resurrected Jesus appears to his disciples and the texts says that Jesus breathed on his disciples and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

John highlights the connection between breath and Spirit, both words deriving from again the same Greek word, *pneuma*.

PAUSE

Now, as I said, the interesting part for me in Wendell Berry's poetic line is "the shape of the wind."

The invisible wind takes shape when it acts on something else, like the tree and the birds.

And the invisible Spirit takes shape when it acts on God's people, and when God's people impact others around them with God's love.

That is the shape of the Spirit.

But, still another way to speak of the shape of the Spirit is as a body.

A body is one's shape.

My body is my shape, unfortunately my body is something more out of shape than in shape, but that is besides the point.

But a body is the shape of that thing.

And so, what is the body of the Spirit?

It is the very body of Jesus Christ.

Christ has ascended back to the Father in heaven, but Christ's body is still here on earth as seen in the Spirit acting and forming the church, the people of God, who are empowered to do the will of God in the world, even as Christ Jesus did the will of God when he walked this earth in his human body.

So yes, the Spirit blows and acts on the people of God, and we take the shape of Christ's body on earth now.

The shape of the Spirit is Christ's body, the church, but not just the church, but the church-in-action, the church doing the will of God in the world.

So, yes, this, what we do here in worship, this is the Spirit taking shape, becoming visible because the Spirit has acted on something else, namely you and me.

And this, what we do here in worship, is the Spirit taking on a body.

But the Spirit takes shape, becomes visible, becomes embodied, in other ways, too.

The Spirit takes shape, becomes visible, becomes embodied in the work of volunteers who serve in the Family Promise program.

The Spirit takes shape, becomes visible, becomes embodied in the Sunday School lessons that are shared with our youngest of church members.

The Spirit takes shape, becomes visible, becomes embodied in committee and council meetings, and in the work of altar guild which prepare the altar for worship.

The Spirit takes shape, becomes visible, becomes embodied in our hospitality to outside groups who use our building, in our ability to welcome people through our doors to enjoy the Praise Him Singers concerts, like a week ago Thursday, and in our welcome to voters on election day.

Yes, the shape of the Spirit is revealed in many and varied ways through the generosity of the people of God—through the many people who give of their time and energy.

And for me, personally, it is beautiful poetry.

For what is more poetic than words crafted to describe a particular image...

What is more poetic are deeds put into action that reveal the power of God at work in the world through the passion of God's people.

For ultimately, God is the preeminent poet.

God is the poet above all other poets.

And God writes his lines of poetry in the world through the people who heed his calling.

The Spirit of God acts upon God's people and we become the very shape of the Spirit in the world.

And it is indeed very lovely poetry.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.