



The Baptism of the Lord

Proper 1, Year B

January 8, 2012

Acts 19:1-7

A sermon by the Rev'd James J. Popham

In this morning's reading from Acts, we recall Paul's question, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" And the rather startling answer, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."¹ Wow! "[W]e have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." These are the words of some first century disciples in Ephesus. And despite my initial inclination to preach about Jesus, as might be most appropriate as we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus, today, those words grabbed me. It was as if the Holy Spirit were saying, talk about me on Sunday. And after all, the Gospel does recount that the Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove. Though, I must say, for me, at least, we can draw upon some understandings of the Holy Spirit that are a bit more revealing and compelling than a dove.

In the 1996 motion picture *The English Patient*, characters portrayed by Ralph Fiennes and Kristin Scott Thomas, are trapped inside a truck during a desert sand storm. Understandably, their conversation turns to "wind."

Almásy: Let me tell you about winds. There is a, a whirlwind from southern Morocco, the aajej, against which the fellahin defend themselves with knives. And there is the... the ghibli, from Tunis...

Katharine Clifton: [giggling] The "ghibli"?

Almásy: [smiling] - the ghibli, which rolls and rolls and rolls and produces a... a rather strange nervous condition. And then there is the... the harmattan, a red wind, which mariners call the sea of darkness. And red sand from this wind has flown as far as the south coast of England, apparently producing... showers so dense that they were mistaken for blood.

Katharine Clifton: Fiction! We have a house on that coast and it has never, never rained blood.

Almásy: No, it's all true. Herodotus, your friend. He writes about it. And he writes about... a, a wind, the simoon, which a nation thought was so evil they declared war on it and marched out against it. In full battle dress. Their swords raised.²

The English Patient, incidentally, is one of at least three "commit adultery and die in a plane crash" movies – so who says the Holy spirit cannot speak to us through current cinema? – the other's, by the way, being 1985's *Out of Africa*, with Meryl Streep and Robert Redford, and then 1999's *Random Hearts*, in which Kristin Scott Thomas also starred, no doubt due to her stellar, Oscar-nominated performance in

¹ Acts 19:2 (NRSV).

² Internet Movie Database, "Memorable quotes from *The English Patient*" (accessed January 7, 2012). <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0116209/quotes?qt=qt0306297>.

The English Patient. And in truth, Herodotus makes scant reference to any winds, much less the ghibli or the simoon or the harmattan. But he and Aeschylus, used the word *pneuma* for wind, and, consequently, today we refer to study of the Holy Spirit as pneumatology.³

But the point is, whether our friend Herodotus reported the simoon or the ghibli, the wind has had great meaning across history and cultures. It is powerful. It itself is invisible. It comes from somewhere else. So we should not be surprised that the Hebrew word from which we translate as spirit, *ruach*, actually has a much greater depth of meaning than the word spirit alone implies. And one of those meanings is wind.⁴

This is not to say that the ancient Hebrews thought that the wind was God or vice versa. But wind did bespeak the power and dynamism that the Hebrews associated with God. As we recited in the Psalm today, "The voice of the LORD is powerful."⁵ And as much as the Hebrews saw God as a harsh judge upon Israel, they also saw God as the one who refreshed his chosen people.⁶ And, again, the wind modeled both. The east wind from the desert scorched the land in judgment, as it threatened in cinematic metaphor, our pre-adulterous couple in the clip from *The English Patient*. But the west wind off the Mediterranean Sea brought rain in the winter and coolness in the summer, and in that way was seen to bring spiritual refreshment.

Ruach also means "breath." In ancient times, before stethoscopes, and EKGs, EEGs, and CPR, breath was life. The live breath. The dead do not. And it was God who breathed life into none other than Adam and Eve, and into all humanity and all creation.

A third meaning of spirit that *ruach* suggests is spirit as charism. Now once in the course of a hearing over a radio station, I asked a witness from a Christian applicant, a minister, what his charism was. He did not know what I meant. His lawyer objected. And we spent quite a few gloriously billable minutes sorting out that I really was not testing his theological vocabulary – though obviously it was lacking. I just wanted to know what his gifts were, what the Holy Spirit enabled him to do that he might otherwise might not be able to do. In the Hebrew Bible, gifts of leadership or military prowess were thought to come from the spirit. But of greatest and most significant gift of the spirit was the Holy Spirit's authentication of a prophet's message as a message from God.⁷

In the 12th Century, a mystic, Joachim of Fiore, posted a Trinitarian understanding of history, which he saw as three great periods or dispensations.⁸ The first was the Age of the Father or Old Testament dispensation, during which we lived under the Law. The second was – or is – the Age of the son or New Testament dispensation, during which we have lived under grace. The duration of this second dispensation,

³ "The Holy Spirit," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 3, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 262.

⁴ Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology* (Oxford; Backwell, 2001) 308-309.

⁵ Psalm 29:4 (NRSV).

⁶ McGrath 308.

⁷ McGrath 308.

⁸ "Joachim of Fiore," *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingston (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005) 883.

according to Joachim, is – or was – 42 generations of about 30 years each. If we do the math, that is around 1200 years, plus or minus, depending on how loosely we interpret “about 30 years each.” Can you see where this is going? What the third age might be?

The next age, again according to Joachim, one we arguably are seeing on the horizon if we are not already crossing into its early stages, is the Age of the Spirit. Very Trinitarian, indeed: the Father; then the Son; and “coming soon,” the Holy Spirit or, more precisely, the Age of the Spirit.

Now, we find no imperative in our tradition to embrace Joachim’s view on the three Trinitarian dispensations. No reason for Jesus to get sweaty palms. But, in truth, it was Jesus who left us with the Holy Spirit when he departed. And anyone who has been around the church since the mid-70s may remember the charismatic renewal or movement that took root and blossomed as we approached the third millennium. In some congregations, the style of music and worship changed dramatically. And we began to explore and observe the gifts of the spirit. As Acts reports, “when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied...”⁹ And in these charismatic gatherings in the 70s and 80s, the gifts of prophecy and speaking in tongues – glossolalia –often were observed. These and other manifestations of the spirit might be considered ecstatic experiences of a sort. They were for many of us hard evidence of the Holy Spirit’s presence and action in the world. In those gatherings, so often the presence of the Holy Spirit was palpable, perhaps, like the wind. And in the vernacular of the 21st century, we were blown away.

But today some might fear that these rather “in your face” gifts of the Holy Spirit are not so much in evidence. That the wind that blew so turbulently has become calm. We might wonder whether the Holy Spirit is still with us?

So let us go back to *ruach*. The wind. Think of a weather front approaching. The wind initially is fierce. Wind chimes serenade us incessantly. The leaves rustle. Boughs bend and break. Lightening and thunder punctuate the lost stillness. Energy virtually crackles in the air. And the rain falls in horizontal sheets, carried by the howling wind.

But then the wind dies down. Its intensity diminishes. It becomes less intrusive, and then refreshing. The rain slackens and falls more softly to the ground, where it no longer cascades to the storm drains, but soaks in and nourishes the earth. The clouds and thunder and lightening move on, leaving the light of the sun to shine through and enabling a new clarity of vision.

That first consciousness of the Holy Spirit, I would suggest, may have been much like that. It was extraordinary and intense. But once the initial ecstatic response waned, the refreshment and nourishment remained, though, perhaps, less immediately visible. So even if the more dramatic manifestations of spirit have diminished, the presence of the Holy Spirit persists at a deeper level. And we can turn our thoughts back to the what the wind, the *ruach*, has brought us. Creation. Breath. Life. Empowerment. And the particular gifts that the Holy Spirit has given each us to enable us to do what we otherwise could not do. The *ruach*, the Holy

⁹ Acts 19:6 (NRSV).

Spirit, never stops blowing and moving. We need only hoist our sails and catch the wind with Christ as our compass.

Then we will do things we never thought we could do. We will go places we never thought we could go. And we will praise our God, "whose power," whose Holy Spirit, "working in us," can do infinitely – infinitely – more than we can ask or imagine.

Amen.

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