

Images of the Spirit
Acts 2:1-21 & Romans 8:14-17, Pentecost Sunday, Year A
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By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

It all started innocently enough. A casual phone call was placed to the principal of Ridgecrest High School by a local minister who had heard that Elvis Presley's first cousin would be coming through Paragould. He was a motivational speaker for youth it seems, and he could stop by the high school and pepper his student talk with anecdotes about Elvis, who he'd apparently actually even met once at a family reunion of some sort. Forgetting for a moment that kids in 1988 were tuned to the music of Prince, Tears for Fears, and Van Halen rather than Elvis, the principal thought this sounded like a great idea, and Elvis' cousin was invited to the school.

With 450 kids squeezed into the high school auditorium, Elvis' cousin told jokes, made faces, and generally encouraged us to stay in school. Then, at the end, he off-handedly remarked that he would be speaking again that night at the local church whose minister had initially tipped off our principal. We could come hear him then, too, if we'd like, and there'd be free pizza.

We must have been having meatloaf at my house that night, because my brother and his best friend decided they'd attend. Their first steps through the doors of this unfamiliar church revealed that this was different from that to which they were accustomed. What they saw was a group of youth parading around the fellowship hall in a sort of conga line and a frenetic youth director cavorting around them crying, "Feel that Holy Spirit! Everyone join the Loooooove Train!" The kids in the conga line had Cheshire cat grins on their faces, rapt by both the dance and the encouragement of their leader. My brother and his friend were for a moment frozen like deer in headlights, but then the smell of pepperoni wafted across their noses and they thought, "When in Rome..." and joined the love train.

After supper but before my brother could make a break for his 1984 Chevy Citation hatchback, all the kids were ushered into the church's sanctuary. On the stage Elvis' cousin appeared, but he was no longer the face-making teller of jokes. Instead, he was overcome with the Holy Ghost, and in a spirit-filled frenzy he preached, pranced, threw his hands skyward, and had side conversations with God for the better part of an hour. Eventually, my brother and his friend crept to the edge of their pew and began to slink toward the back of the church to make their escape. Cousin Elvis caught sight of them, pointed a finger and bellowed, "You kids better sit down and pay attention, because this is what heaven is going to be like!"

Later when my brother told me all about his experience, I was glad I'd stayed home and had the meatloaf.

My brother's experience isn't too far off the mark, I suspect, from what comes to many of our minds when we consider the Holy Spirit. With God we are comfortable. With Jesus we can kind of relate. But the Holy Spirit? Just think back a few moments ago to the jolt we felt when the reading from Acts began. Acts adds that at the first Christian Pentecost the Spirit appeared as the "rush of a violent wind" and "tongues of fire" that rested on the gathered crowd. The images of the Spirit with which we most often come into contact are discomfiting at least and downright disturbing at most.

It should be said that our discomfort does not mean that these images of the Spirit are off-base or untrue. Though I might offer a critique of his work with youth, I would not claim that Elvis' cousin lacked a true connection to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God will not be constrained by our comfort zones. The Spirit is at times wild and mystifying, and the trouble of our coming to grips with that Spirit is our trouble rather than God's.

The real problem for those of us for whom these manifestations of the Spirit feel so foreign is that we are left wondering, "Does the Holy Spirit have anything to do with me? Am I defective in some way, because I am more comfortable with liturgy rather than the "love train," with quiet prayer instead of frenzied speaking in tongues?"

You are not defective, and neither am I. And despite the reading from Acts that we hear each Pentecost Sunday—or perhaps *in addition* to it—there are other images of the Spirit that may resonate for us. I'd like to share a few with you.

The first is shared by John Wesley, founder of the Methodists, who was himself a good Anglican priest until the day he died. At a Moravian meeting on Aldersgate Street in London in 1738, Wesley found that the Holy Spirit touched even him. This is what he recorded of the event (and these are words some of you will have heard before):

In the evening, I went *very unwilling* to a society in Aldersgate Street where one was reading Luther's "Preface" to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, *I felt my heart strangely warmed*. I felt that I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.¹

Notice what happened here. On this night Wesley felt both tug and resistance simultaneously. He did not want to go and be among this group of Moravians, and yet God's Spirit beckoned him subtly and would not leave him alone. Once there, Wesley experienced a

¹ Rack, Henry D. *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of British Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 144.

comforting presence of which no one was aware but himself. There was no dramatic display, only the warming of his heart.

The invitation to be moved spiritually in a new way; the comfort of God's presence—that is the Holy Spirit.

The second image is in the Book of Exodus, where Moses leads the people Israel out of bondage in Egypt, through the Red Sea, and toward the Promised Land. But there's one catch: before Canaan can be reached, the Israelites must traverse the wilderness. By day, the terrain is rocky and treacherous. A wrong turn and the people could be injured or lost. By night, the landscape is inky black, and all manner of demons seem to lash out from the darkness. When the Israelites don't know how to move forward, God's Spirit comes to them in their need, offering a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, "to lead them on their way," Exodus says, "and give them light."

The Apostle Paul adds to this in Romans that "all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God."

Guidance through the treacherous terrain of life—the intuition that gives us compass during the day, and the hope that grants us light in all darkness—that is the Holy Spirit.

A final image: A man who had been a fairly active member of his parish has all but stopped coming to church. On a brisk winter evening his old priest comes to visit, and the man invites the priest in. They sit in front of the glowing fire.

"It's not that I have anything against the church, Father," the man says, "I've just decided to focus on me in my life. I'm not unreligious, but I can experience God when I'm by myself working or fishing or anything else just as much as when I'm with people from the church."

The old priest sits silently in front of the fire, and both of them slowly become mesmerized by the glowing embers. Within the fire, it is almost impossible to distinguish one log from another. Surely, each log is a separate piece of wood, but the fire that passes through and between them becomes one glow that binds them together.

Without saying a word, the old priest takes the fireplace tongs and lifts a small piece of wood off of the fire. He sets it on the hearth apart from the rest of the glowing logs. For a while this small, now separated piece of wood dances and flickers within with the same glow as the greater fire. Slowly, though, the solitary ember dims and then loses its color and becomes cold.

"Only when the embers live together can the fire live in the wood," the priest finally says and then looks intently at his friend, "And remember, the fire burns not only for its own sake, but for those outside who seek relief from the cold."

With that the priest reaches forward and with his bare hands picks up the cold, charred small piece of wood off of the hearth. He tosses it back into the fire, and immediately it glows with light and heat again. He stands up and shakes hands with his host, offering him a broad smile and going on his way.

The life-giving fire and energy of the gathered Church, which are experienced by its members both for their own sake and as a witness to a world grown cold and hard with cynicism and despair—that is the Holy Spirit.

Comfort, guidance, energy, and our life together. These are the Holy Spirit. We rarely name them as such, but it is time we began. The Spirit comes to us everyday in moments of reflection, doubt, decision, and fellowship. It comes again today, for today is Pentecost.

Amen.