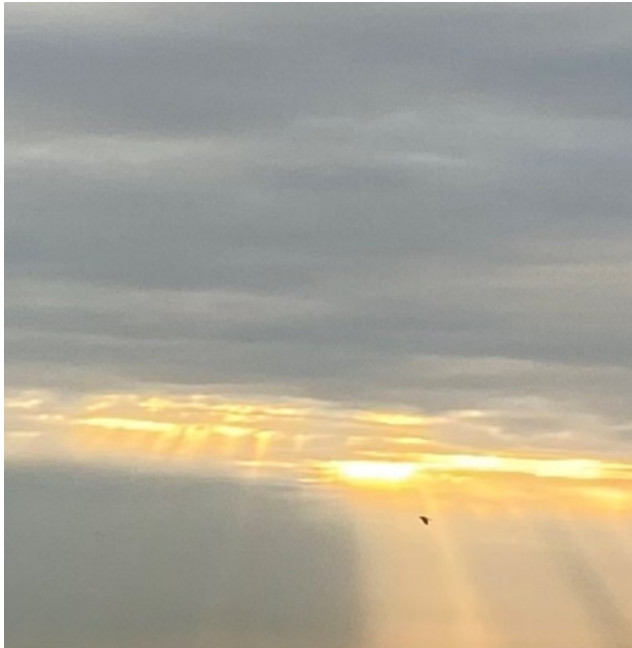


# **“Pentecost Sermon” by Jackie Wallen**

## **Pentecost**



**May 28, 2023**

I have preached on Pentecost several times because I love the Pentecost story so much. I love that both men and women were represented among the disciples in the upper room that day. I love that though the disciples were diverse and spoke many different languages, they all could understand one another. I love their awe and wonder as the Holy Spirit descended on them in tongues of flame, empowering them to go out and be the body of Christ for the rest of the world. Each time I preach I find another theme in this story to research and contemplate. This time I have been thinking a lot about the Holy Spirit. What is the Holy Spirit, anyway? I decided to focus on that question for this sermon. In my research, I discovered there is a whole field in theology called “pneumatology” that is concerned with the study of the Holy Spirit. (“Pneuma” means

breath or spirit in Greek). Most of the controversies and debates in this field are theological or historical and largely way too erudite for me. I'm more interested in what the Holy Spirit is experientially. My questions are: How do we encounter the Holy Spirit, how does it feel, and what happens as a consequence?

In the Pentecost reading for a different year, John quotes Jesus as saying:

*I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.*

In his first Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul enumerates the gifts of the Holy Spirit. These are not just gifts to individuals; they are gifts to the church community as a whole

They are:

- Wisdom
- Knowledge
- Faith
- Healing
- Power to do miracles
- Prophecy

- Ability to tell spirits apart
- Ability to speak in different languages
- Ability to understand different languages

Some Christian traditions emphasize some of these gifts more than others. We, for example, are not proponents of “speaking in tongues” but many of us speak and/or understand more than just our native language. And some are in the process of learning other languages.

I don't know anyone in Seekers who has performed a miracle, but I do know that when Seekers join in prayer for a person or situation, miracles do often happen.

I was intrigued by the concept of telling different spirits apart. The idea behind it is that not all spirit communication is from the Holy Spirit. Just because we think we hear the Holy Spirit telling us something doesn't necessarily mean that that's who we're hearing from. We often need help distinguishing the voice of the Holy Spirit from other voices we are hearing in our head, some of which may simply be our own ego or, worse yet, our own libido speaking.

Elizabeth O'Connor, in *Search for Silence*, said:

*We carry the treasure in earthenware vessels. The Word we say we heard is always subject to questioning, always to tested within the fellowship and confirmed or denied by those among us who have the gift of distinguishing true spirits from false. When we become serious about prayer, we learn how important this gift is, for the contemplative person will be addressed, will be given dreams and will see visions*

Discernment is an important process at Seekers, and we use our spiritual companions or even assemble clearness committees to help us identify the voice of the Holy Spirit.

Christianity is not the only religion that talks about the Holy Spirit. Though it does not personify it or compartmentalize God into three persons, Judaic writings often refer to the divine force, quality, and influence of God over all of creation. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are enumerated in the Old Testament (Isaiah):

The gifts of the Spirit, as enumerated in Isaiah, are

- Wisdom
- Understanding
- Counsel
- Fortitude
- Knowledge
- Piety
- Fear of the Lord, or what we would now call awe

Hinduism acknowledges the Holy Spirit in the greeting, “namaste “(**naa**·muh·stay), which means, “The Divine within me bows to the same Divine within you.” Buddhism is basically nontheistic, but Islam conceives of the Holy Spirit in much the same way as Judaism.

Because it is mysterious and, in many ways, indescribable, the Holy Spirit is often described in metaphors. Gordon T. Smith, in his book, *Welcome Holy Spirit*, describes five commonly used metaphors for the Holy Spirit:

They are:

- Wind or breath of God – a creative force that brings order and beauty out of darkness and chaos and animates living beings.
- The oil of anointing – The oil of anointing in the Christian tradition symbolizes the conferral of the healing or protective powers of the Holy Spirit or the recognition of spiritual gifts.

- The flame of God – The flame of God is what we encounter in the Pentecost story. It is associated with awe and a calling to ministry.
- Living or flowing water – something that provides comfort and peace.
- The dove or hovering bird – symbolizes guidance, call, and discernment.

These metaphors indicate that the Holy Spirit is a creative and animating force that can guide, heal, protect, call to ministry, provide comfort and peace, and support discernment. I'm going to add another metaphor that I use for the Holy Spirit. That is the sky, especially the morning sky. I see it as the Holy Spirit penetrating the cloud of unknowing. In many religions the sky represents God. Sunrise, to me, is a daily symbol of resurrection that presents itself uniquely each day.

You've probably heard the expression "filled with the spirit." Sometimes we may have those moments. Have you ever had an experience like that? I did once upon looking into a majestic forest when hiking a trail. It was definitely awesome, awe-inspiring, and other-worldly. Usually, connection to the Holy Spirit is more subtle. Sometimes just a tickle, like the faint butterfly flutterings of a quickening embryo. I hope that when we have our comments time of sharing after this sermon people will share some of their experiences with the Holy Spirit.

In my research for this sermon, I also looked for ways in which we can connect with the Holy Spirit and invite it in. I called the Holy Spirit "it" just now, but in my research, I found that the Holy Spirit is almost always referred to as "he." It seemed strange to me because I don't think of spirits as having a gender and, as far as the Holy Spirit is concerned, if I had to assign a gender it would be "she," not "he." "Pneuma," in Greek, is gender neutral. In Hebrew and

Aramaic, Jesus' languages, the word for spirit is feminine. Over time, the Trinity became all male, though inclusive language has to a great extent chipped away at that usage in recent years....

Anyway, as I searched, I found a number of tips on how to connect to the Holy Spirit. I'll present some of the best ones here,

- **Greet the Holy Spirit as a person every morning.** I do this. In the morning, I go to my window, look at the sky, which is a daily miracle, and say: "Thank you Holy Mystery for this new day."
- **Practice Centering Prayer.** Centering Prayer is a method of silent prayer taught by Father Thomas Keating in which we experience God's presence within us, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than consciousness itself. This method of prayer is both a relationship with God and a discipline to foster that relationship.
- **Honor imaginal states.** The unconscious often communicates with the conscious psyche via images. Recognizing and understanding these images requires "Imaginal Intelligence," which is a combination of picture interpretation, guided active imagination, unconscious doodling, graphical mapping, and functional personification. Remembering and writing down our dreams is one way of honoring imaginal states.
- **Engage in creative activities you enjoy.** Creative activities draw on the right side of the brain, stimulating images and intuition and enabling a state of "flow" in which the ego is transcended, and new perceptions are possible.
- **Engage in physical activities you enjoy.** Physical activity, whether it is a form of exercise or something like cleaning, organizing, gardening, or yard work, can also engender a state of flow and loosen the grip of ego

on perception and thought.

- **Appreciate and contemplate nature.** Being in natural surroundings and contemplating natural beauty are ways of opening up our doors of perception and appreciating the holy.
- **Practice Lectio Divina, or divine reading** is a traditional monastic practice of scriptural reading, meditation and prayer intended to promote communion with God. Traditionally, *Lectio Divina* has four separate steps: read; meditate; pray; contemplate. First a passage of Scripture is read, then its meaning is reflected upon. This is followed by prayer and contemplation. The practice helps one listen for God's voice.
- **Go on a spiritual retreat.** A spiritual retreat is an opportunity to get away from the noise and distractions of everyday life and spend time in contemplation, being open to the voice of the Holy Spirit.

Today I've talked about some of what I have learned about the Holy Spirit and I'm hoping that in the sharing time we are about to have, you will also share some of your thoughts on how to be open to the voice of the Holy Spirit. I also hope you will join me downstairs after worship for the opening of my photography exhibit, *Sky and Spirit*. It shows one way I use the natural world to connect to the Holy Spirit.