

When the Spirit moves...

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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The wild modern prophet of Jesus' time, John the Baptist, pens this story and Mark's Gospel, "John announces the time, and it comes quickly. Right after John promises that the coming one "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit," Jesus arrives on the scene... When he...arises from the waters of the Jordan, he sees "the heavens torn apart..." One scholar says of this, "...in this moment of Jesus' baptism, heaven and earth are transparent to one another... The prophet [Isaiah's] prayer that God would 'tear open the heavens and come down' (Isa 64:1) is answered, and the promise of 'a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert' (Isa. 43:19) is fulfilled."¹

John's fashion sense and outrageous dietary choices could distract us from his pivotal role, announcing the arrival of the Son of God, the one who will teach, and preach, heal, and also will be the suffering servant who is executed. If you missed John's message in Mark, then surely you cannot miss the work of God's Spirit!

One commentator puts it this way,

That dove does not simply alight on Jesus, because in the Greek, [it is] ...said to have come into him. [Jesus] is infused with the Spirit from God.²

The Spirit is powerful as it announces and disrupts. The heavens torn open, the Spirit descending like a dove into Jesus, and a holy voice declaring, "You are my beloved son, with whom I'm pleased."

This is how Mark's Gospel begins the Gospel, with a Spirit-filled moment!

A cynical person could say to me, though, "Well, last week we saw drama unfold in Washington, as a mob stormed the U.S. Capitol building. Is that Spirit at work?"

In Mark's version of the Baptism of Jesus, the Spirit inaugurates Jesus' ministry, a ministry of love, even suffering love. I think we all watched the videos from Washington in horror, that drama grounded in fear and self-absorption – that is not the sign of God's Spirit at work.

For a children's time long ago, I used a fan to illustrate how the Spirit might work. Dropping a piece of paper, it falls. But the fan disrupts the downward path, moving it sideways. I said, "Spirit is like the blast of that fan. Can you see the wind? No. But it is there. We cannot see God's Spirit, but we know it is at work because of what it does in our lives and around us."

These Sundays from now until Lent are about holiness revealed. They are grand stories of epiphanies, but I'm thinking that the epiphanies we will experience will not, for the most part, be so grand.

When I begin the sentence, "When the Spirit moves...", what comes to your mind?

¹ "Homiletical Perspective", Ted A. Smith. *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration*.

² Melinda Quivik. WorkingPreacher.org January 10, Commentary on Mark 2:1-10

How does God's Spirit factor into your personal faith experience? You probably have an understanding of God, Creator. Probably also Jesus, what he means to you.

But Spirit, Christian tradition holds that it is the presence that goes with us, coaxes us and even cajoles us when we are not quite listening. Have you had a Spirit-filled moment of disruption?

I have countless stories myself. Since using that image with children in worship, the wind of the fan blowing the paper – Spirit blowing – I have marvelled time and again after worship services when we have been interrupted by something. In the little town of Capreol, who would think that someone might come in off the street and interrupt worship! Well, that has happened a number of times!

My daughter Sophia's baptism was interrupted by a person storming the rural church declaring that he had a word from God. That rattled the capacity congregation! I think that when we are open in heart and mind, and our community doors are open (figuratively and literally), we can expect the Spirit to come blowing in, disrupting.

But are we really ready for that disruption? Are we open to the little moments of God revealed in daily life? Maybe a little bit of disruption, in these monotonous COVID times. But not too much.

Here's the thing. I don't know about you, but my greatest spiritual growth, has happened as a result of moments of disruption. My glitch-free plans for worship upended as a newcomer interrupts my sermon. Did they not read the holy etiquette manual? I've come to believe that if the Spirit is not disrupting, often I'm too much in control.

So my invitation to you today is this: As you and I sprinkle ourselves with water, remember baptism. May we reflect on what baptism means as we mature in faith. In Mark, being baptized by John was about repentance. Jesus needed to be baptized as an initiation into his holy life of service, and costly love. Can we, you and I, pray together today for Spirit to reveal for us opportunities to risk loving *especially* when we are tempted to judge or succumb to fear? When the Spirit moves... Amen.