

“LETTING THE SPIRIT FLOW”

Acts 10:44-48 May 6, 2018

The Holy Spirit is a mysterious thing. It's like the wind—it blows where it will. It's like water—it can't be controlled. It falls on people without warning. For some, like those in today's reading from Acts, it comes through hearing the word. For others, it is seen in acts of miraculous healing. And there are those who experience the Holy Spirit through the voices of the faithful speaking in tongues and extolling God.

Whatever the Spirit is, one thing is for certain, and that is that it inspires transformation in people who experience it. It is life-changing to encounter an act of the Spirit. It can't be summoned or contrived. It is always unexpected. Sometimes the Spirit comes in such strange and mysterious ways that we may find it difficult to explain it to others. But we know it is real because we experienced it.

Recently in my messages I have shared some of Rev. Dawn Chesser's experiences with her mother. I will continue with that this morning but she takes us in a very unexpected direction as she writes about the movement of the Holy Spirit. I will be looking forward to your feedback on this latest chapter...

“I have written over the past weeks about my presence with my mom and dad during a recent health crisis. A lot of what I've written has focused on her struggle with Alzheimer's disease. But what caused me to go to Arkansas to be with them was not her dementia. What drove me there was congestive heart failure.

I have been to Arkansas a lot in the past year. I was there in early December of 2017 to support my father after a recent diagnosis with cancer. (He's doing well and expects to be able to manage his disease.) When I visited in early

December my mom was already complaining that she couldn't breathe.

My mom's dementia causes her a great deal of anxiety. Sometimes she has panic attacks which cause her to think she can't breathe. She has had this problem on and off for quite some time. She had talked to her doctor about it and he had examined her and found no physical reason for her problem in the past. So when my mom complained of not being able to breathe in December, I assumed, along with my dad, that it was a problem in her mind.

I returned at the end of December for a family holiday gathering at which my entire family was present. My two adult sons stayed in my parent's home with them. We had a big family party at the end of the year. My mom and dad attended, and although Mom seemed confused, none of us thought she was physically ill. She continued to say she couldn't breathe, and we continued to treat her complaint as a product of anxiety.

I went back to my home in Tennessee on December 31. My eldest son and his fiancé stayed on a couple more days before they returned to their home. On the last day they were at my parents' house sitting in the library talking to my parents when a traumatic thing happened.

I mentioned in my notes on Easter Sunday that my father keeps canaries. He has had many canaries over the years. Most were named "Lucky Fibre," after the make-believe superhero that my father became in play during his childhood years growing up in south Alabama. There were a few canaries with other names: "Wilson," who was a roller (rollers sing in a certain kind of way), named for Arkansas artist Roller Wilson. Frank Sinatra. (No further explanation required.) but the latest bird, a very young, bright yellow canary, obtained in August 2017, remained nameless in late December. They had grown accustomed

to calling him “Bird.”

Bird was in love with my mother. They had a special relationship. Bird’s attachment to my mom was unusual, and unlike any other canary they’ve ever owned. If Mom was out of the room, Bird would sing at the top of his lungs, seemingly summoning her to him. When she came in she would whistle at him and he would sing back to her, like a conversation. She’d bring him bits of apple. He would sit and stare at her in her rocking chair. It was like he was obsessed.

When others came into the room, Bird would get louder. It was as if he was trying to drown out the competing voices in an attempt to hear the voice of his one true love, my mom. This is just what was going on the last day my son and his fiancé were there. The four of them were sitting in the library talking, and Bird was trying to drown out their conversation by singing as loud as he could.

But then they noticed Bird had gone silent. Mom whistled. No response. So Dad went to investigate. He found Bird upside down on his water dish with his head underwater, dead. He had drowned.

We now know that it was probably during this time that my mom was building up fluid around her heart and lungs as she went into congestive heart failure. She literally was having great difficulty breathing. When she was finally hospitalized, later that week, they removed a liter and a half of fluid from her right lung alone. It took nine days in the hospital to get all the fluid out of her body.

I am convinced that Bird knew my mother was drowning in her own fluid buildup, and that he drowned himself in a desperate attempt to communicate this to our family. Maybe that sounds crazy. It probably is. But I believe Bird drowned himself to try to save my mother’s life.

Canaries have been used by humans as sentinel species for the past

hundred years. Sentinel species are organisms, usually animals, that detect risks to humans by providing advance warning of an impending danger. Far back in history humans have observed the activities of animals in order to divine threats to their safety and well-being. In the case of canaries, it was around 1913 when coal miners began taking canaries into mines with them in order to detect carbon monoxide and other gases that could be hazardous to humans. The birds, who were more sensitive to the gases than humans, would become sick, enabling the miners to escape or protect themselves from the deadly fumes.

Bird was, for me, a channel through which the saving power of the Holy Spirit came to my mother. I wouldn't call his method of death a baptism, but it does seem ironic to me that he immersed his head in his water dish and drowned, in a room filled with people, while my mother was drowning from congestive heart failure.

Can we say things like that without sounding crazy? I usually don't, although in recent months I seem to be more mystically-inclined than I have been in the past. And let's be honest: the Holy-Spirit is crazy-inducing.

People are slain in the Spirit and fall to the ground and writhe. They speak gibberish. They dance. They convulse. They interpret events in ways others find questionable, but they believe with their whole hearts. Such is the case with my interpretation of Bird's untimely death.

Sometimes when I write or preach, I find myself letting go and just letting the Spirit flow through me. When that happens, my fingers can hardly keep up with the typing. If I'm preaching, I feel overcome with a sense of wonder, energy and confidence. Artist and musicians are especially sensitive to the Spirit's work in this way I think.

Having faith that the Holy Spirit is with us is surely a little bit crazy. Isn't that why they call it a leap? Maybe not every act of the Spirit is as crazy as my story about Bird, but we who have experienced its power know for certain that the Holy Spirit is crazy-inducing, all-encompassing, and very, very real.

Many of us watched the Olympic ice skaters and you can see this phenomenon there as well. The really excellent skaters are able to just put their trust completely in what they've trained their bodies to do and let the music take their artistry and athleticism to a higher level. It's true of all greatness in human beings. We become better than we could ever be on our own when we channel the power of the Holy Spirit.

We've all had these experiences, when we've let go of our self-consciousness to the point that we feel like we have become vessels for the work of something more than ourselves, something wonderful and holy. This, to me, is what it means to be open to the Holy Spirit. For me there are times when I'm praying that if you asked me afterwards, what I said, I couldn't tell you. I feel then that the Holy Spirit has given me the words to be a blessing to those who hear them.

And it overcomes people. It just simply does. You can't stop it or tell it what to do. It goes where it will, like the wind, like the water.

Jackson Henry marveled at the question, "Can anyone withhold the water?" He said he has always wondered if anyone is in a position of authority to withhold the water. Can we keep it from someone? Is it possible? And the answer is, no, we can't. It is overflowing. It is unstoppable. We can't keep this water from overflowing.

We build dams. We try to hold back the water. But we can't. We know that. Dams fall. The water is too strong. It goes where it will. It isn't for us

to control. “Can anyone withhold the water?” No, because it isn’t ours to withhold. The waters of baptism, the waters of God’s immersive love, are for everyone. It flows where it wants.

Is there anyone upon whom the winds of God’s love are not blowing? Is there anyone to whom God is not making an offer of grace and acceptance? The Good News of Jesus Christ is that the answer is a resounding NO! Because God’s love is for everyone, without exception, even on the Gentiles. It’s not up to us to decide. It’s up to us to welcome all who love Jesus to come to his table and feast.

“Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” No. For I am convinced, as Paul puts it so beautifully in his letter to the Romans, that neither death, nor life, no angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39 NRSV). Amen.