

“Every Time I Feel the Spirit”

A homily delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on May 20, 2018

Based in Psalm 104: 24-34

Following this little sermon, we will be welcoming our four confirmands into membership in our church. They already met with our church board, what we call, the Session. They presented their statements of faith at that time. Today, Celebration Sunday, we celebrate them. So, I want to begin this morning with snippets from their statements.

Sam Bonkowski A core tenant of the Christian faith is in the existence of God, which I affirm. I believe God is forgiving, loving, kind, and Eternal.

Meredith Miller: I believe that God is not one entity. Rather, God is the collective life of the world, and the relationships that we build with the world around us and other people.

Paige Cooper: For me the church is a place where I will always find a sense of community and safety. It is a place to build relationships [in] a judgment-free environment.

Abbey Murphy I believe that being a Presbyterian means you live your life with integrity, forgiveness, love and compassion.

Paige Cooper: I believe that the Holy Spirit is created in God's image. It is always there to make sure you never need to feel alone.

Meredith Miller: Jesus Christ, a man born to Mary, taught revolutionary ideas on love and acceptance. He was killed for undermining the current authority and status quo, but his legacy and teachings live on.

Sam Bonkowski: May my faith continually be growing.

There you have it: Attestations from the young to the meaning and value of God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, what it means to be Presbyterian, what it means that we are a judgment free community of faith committed to growing in that faith together.

What could be more beautiful?

Now, with those wonderful words setting the tone, I have asked Andrew to read this morning's scripture because it is a statement of faith, as well. It is written in a poetic form and is, in fact, a song.

Psalm 104:24-34 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

²⁴ O Lord, how manifold are your works!

In wisdom you have made them all;

the earth is full of your creatures.

²⁵ Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
creeping things innumerable are there,
living things both small and great.

²⁶ There go the ships,
and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.

²⁷ These all look to you
to give them their food in due season;

²⁸ when you give to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.

²⁹ When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die
and return to their dust.

³⁰ When you send forth your spirit,^[a] they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground.

³¹ May the glory of the Lord endure forever;
may the Lord rejoice in his works—

³² who looks on the earth and it trembles,
who touches the mountains and they smoke.

³³ I will sing to the Lord as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have being.

³⁴ May my meditation be pleasing to him,
for I rejoice in the Lord.

³⁵ Bless the Lord, O my soul.
Praise the Lord!

Let me repeat one verse from there: one attestation of faith -- *When you send forth your spirit, [all creatures] are created; and you renew the face of the ground.*

This lovely psalm is a companion text for this Sunday which is Pentecost. It speaks about the animating spirit of God.

So. let me now focus on the meaning of that spirit. Most years on this Sunday we read the text from *Acts* about how the disciples were gathered in an upper room and the Holy Spirit manifested among the disciples as tongues of fire above their heads. Every person present, it was said, understood everyone else no matter what they said and in whatever language they spoke.

That story provides a great opportunity to talk about inclusivity, a subject we at Wasatch talk a lot about. But that is not everything the coming of the Holy Spirit represents.

One day, near the end of his stay on earth, Jesus was speaking to his disciples about the inevitability of his departure. The gospel writer, John, says that he became soft as water with them. He said, *I need to go away so that I can send you the comforter*. That word is sometimes translated, “advocate,” but I think comforter is a more literal translation.

I want to repeat what Paige Cooper said about the Holy Spirit in her statement of faith for reasons that should become clear -- “I believe that the Holy Spirit is created in God’s image. It is always there to make sure you never need to feel alone.”

Did you hear the comfort in that? *You never need to feel alone* – it’s precisely what Jesus was trying to communicate to his disciples at the end.

Heaven knows the disciples needed comforting. Heaven knows we all need comforting sometimes.

Now, allow me to repeat something Sam said - *May my faith continually be growing*.

It seems to me that one way our faith grows is in community when we witness how God works in our midst to comfort us – to offer us peace – a peace that, it is said, passes all understanding – a peace that has at its core a delicious mystery.

Again, it has been my experience that this peace often comes when we sense we need it the most and we think there is no way in the world we will ever find it. Somehow it just shows up, and there it is.

So let me finish this little homily by telling a story. It’s not one I’ve shared before. It is a first-person story told by a woman in her 40s named Ellen Powell. It’s a story about her relationship with her mother, so let it be a story that joins this week’s Feast of Pentecost to the celebration of Mother’s Day we observed last week. These two holidays often come together. See if you think there might be something of the spirit, the comforter, in this remembrance.

Ellen Powell tells her story this way ...

“We had a rocky time together [my 89 year old mother and I]. She had never been easy to get along with ... Maybe I wasn’t easy either. Finally when I was 42 I gave up hoping she would turn into the kind of mother I’d always wanted.

When I got word that she was dying I started to spend a lot of time visiting her. The first month after she got her prognosis she was very depressed and distant. She either slept or stared at the wall, her face a mask of misery. One day during that month I was sitting in the chair next to her bed. The sun had set and her room was almost completely dark. I shifted my chair closer and rested my elbows on the edge of her bed. She reached out her hand to touch my face and stroked it very gently. It was a wonderful thing.

[On another day] I was playing a game of rummy with my mother and she was cheating like crazy, when she announced that she had to go to the bathroom.

[On the way] she let out a long breath and collapsed. I caught her and lowered her to the floor. . . she eventually let out a long final breath. Her pulse stopped. She was completely still. I held her there for a moment, frozen. . . I thought about what an honor it was that she had chosen me to die with. I held her in my arms for a few minutes wondering how long it would take before someone [would come in]. All of a sudden her body jerked. I almost jumped out of my skin. . . She was alive.

There we were on the floor, two living people, one holding the other. [Two attendants finally found us. We got her up and] back into bed. Ten minutes later my mother was beating me in a game of rummy, cheating like mad.

Later that day I was sitting on the edge of my mother's bed. I can only imagine how stunned and exhausted I must have looked, because she said to me, "Now dear, when I'm really dying – not one of these dress rehearsals I seem to be having – but when I'm really going, I want you to know that I'll be kissing you all over!" Then she fluttered her hands around my head. With love pouring from her eyes, she said, "Kiss, kiss, kiss, kiss!"

Something was happening to her. She was being remade.

I'd never seen her so full of joy. The next day the phone rang ... it was Sister Pat, a nun who worked with the hospice organization that was caring for my mother.. . I told Sister Pat that my mother had made a complete turnaround in the past 24 hours. I told her how she had been completely and inconsolably miserable, and that now, after what had happened, she seemed happy and content. It was like night and day, I said.

There was a long pause. Then Sister Pat said, 'Your mother is a very fortunate woman.'

'Huh?' I said, thinking, 'She's dying; that's fortunate?'

Sister Pat continued. In her twenty-odd years of working with dying people, she said, she had observed that the ones who had [experienced] 'little deaths' were very peaceful for the rest of their lives. She said it was as if they got to take a little look-see and realized there was nothing to be afraid of on the other side.

My mother and I had six more months after that. She had five more dress rehearsals and was proud of them all. One time I called her up and when she got on the phone she said, 'Guess what I did today. I died again!'

We never talked about much – just the weather, bits of news – but it didn't matter anymore. We lived in a little blue egg of light, and the love poured back and forth between us inside the egg. I finally got the mother I'd been waiting for." Amen