

Today, on a day when many of our cities have erupted into flames, we celebrate the day the Holy Spirit exploded on the scene in wind and flames.

In the midst of an already grueling time of pandemic, this might be the hardest morning in my career to be a preacher. Fortunately, I've got some helpers. Several people have sent me their experience of the Spirit during the pandemic.

Things have changed since I put out those questions for people to reflect on. God is not silent on the issues that have hit this country this last week, and neither can we be.

But as I've thought about how to structure our message for this morning, we're going to look at the different workings of the Holy Spirit. The Bible talks about several different ways the Holy Spirit works in our lives.

In his gospel, John talks about the Holy Spirit as comforter, or advocate. Someone in our corner praying in and for us. In today's reading, Jesus breathes the Spirit into his disciples and grants them peace.

Also in John's gospel, Jesus talks about the second way the Spirit works. The Spirit makes us one – draws us all into one body. In the Spirit, we are interconnected and interdependent.

A third of the Spirit is to teach us, to guide us. Jesus said he will send the Spirit, the advocate, to teach us all and remind us of the things Jesus taught.

And then there's the work of the Spirit at Pentecost. That's the Spirit that really turns things upside down. The disciples are changed in ways they did not expect.

Some Christians use the term sanctification as the work of the spirit – to be made holy. We think of it as death and resurrection – the spirit's work in us is to bring death to the old hurtful things about us and about our world so that something new...something more just and life-giving can be born. All four of those have played a role in things people have shared.

Let's talk first about this sense of connectedness. Several people lifted that up in their reflections.

Theresa, who is a higher risk person, talked about more phone calls with her parents and more text exchanges with family. I've heard others say similar things. We're in some ways doing a better job staying connected to family than we did before.

Marcia had this to say about connectedness and how God works through our loved ones: When I pay attention I can see God's handiwork. When I'm feeling down, then all of a sudden I'll hear from one of the kids or grandkids, like this morning I got a text from Tanner and he's

sending us a book he read earlier this year and really liked. Seeing Todd and Jessie's little girls is always a joy.

She also talked about hearing from a friend from Merlin's Navy days...just kind of out of the blue.

Annie talked about having an odd sensation as she was driving home from her work early on – that she and everyone in the cars around her were sharing this same experience...a world upended by this virus. It is, as she said, a weird community builder.

Shared experiences bring a sense of unity, maybe especially shared suffering.

I think Marcia summed this up well: I think this time has made people stop and think about what's really important in life: friends, loved ones and the many wonders of God's creation! I've become more aware how much I miss getting together with friends and our church family. We are keeping in touch by phone which helps and I really look forward to our weekly church services.

Next, we'll talk about Holy Spirit as guide.

Virg talked about this. It started with two dreams – one of a remodeled kitchen and another of owning a baby grand. Following a trip to the 2019 home show, a series of things fell into place and the kitchen was remodeled and in January the baby grand was installed.

Then said, Virg, God says post yourself playing a song on the piano. So I do.

I'm then overwhelmed by the number of people on Facebook who find it as a sort of haven once the pandemic started. People started requesting songs and tell me how they would look forward to my song every evening.

It would provide them with relaxation as the world seemed to be spiraling out of control. They would play it while putting their kids to bed, play it for their loved ones shut inside nursing homes, they would tell me stories of how the songs would remind them of loved ones who had died, growing up in church, etc.

God knew how I could help during the Pandemic and he worked in a big way to make that happen. Yes, God has surprised me, but I can now clearly see how the spirit worked on me to make this happen.

Now, the Spirit of fire. Fire in scripture is often spoken of as a refiner's fire. The Spirit as fire brings death and resurrection. That Spirit shines a light on things that are not in accordance with God's will for a just and good creation.

That is painful. We in the church have had to look at some things about ourselves. Here's this from Deanna - I have a dear friend who has been on disability and home bound for about thirty years. When the lockdown started and new ways were found by churches, businesses and families to connect or just to deal with new limitations, my friend commented " now they know what it feels like. Why couldn't they have made this kind of effort for folks like me before?" I am convicted by this. Indeed, why not.

And from Annie: in the midst of great personal sorrow on other fronts, I am not sure how I am finding God in this. Is God found in how this pandemic show's how many cracks we have in our very own neighborhoods? It is WRONG that over 55,000 meals are handed out to our community every week to help keep our children fed. Or that there are lines of people lining up for needed food. It is WRONG that a disease impacts more people who do not look like me than I will ever need to worry about. It is WRONG that our least paid are our "essential" personnel.

An now country is screaming out in rage at the lack of justice. And I have to teach my son, again, how to act if ever approached by a police officer or anyone distrustful of him due to his skin color. I know God is present - I can't explain how I know that but I do. But - experiencing God in some of the ways you have asked - does not fit for me now.

As we go through all that's going on now, all of these workings of the Spirit will continue to help us. We will need the comfort offered by things like Virg's music, and the music, art and dancing of others. We'll need the comfort of shared prayers and words of hope. Recognizing our connectedness will help us to see that the well-being of all is dependent on the well-being of those who are poorest, weakest and most oppressed.

We can trust that the Holy Spirit will continue to teach us and guide us. May we have the humility to be teachable.

But if we try to avoid or escape the work of the Holy Spirit to turn things upside down...to bring death and resurrection, we will be denying the Spirit's power.

So many things are incredibly painful right now. That's because we are still living in the death part of this death and resurrection. We will not get to resurrection until we have learned what the death has to teach us.

My prayer is that we learn that now....that we let the Spirit put to death systemic racism. Race riots have happened repeatedly since the Civil War. Sometimes they're a year apart, sometimes 30. But until we are willing to hear and believe the cries of our black and brown brothers and sisters, this won't be the last time.

It's OK to be angry about the violence and wanton destruction of riots. But if we are not at least equally angry about the deaths of people of color brought about by systemic racism, then we have not yet learned what all this has to teach us.

I wish I could tie this morning's message up neatly with a warm fuzzy feeling. Today the Spirit with us is the Spirit of fire...the fire that can purify and bring utter transformation. The spirit that brings death to injustice and hatred.

I want to force resurrection...I want it to hurry up...or at least I want to see a well laid out strategy

But here might be the best I've got, and it's not mine. It comes from Paul's letter to the Romans: ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in ^[o] hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes^[p] for what is seen? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes^[a] with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷ And God,^[t] who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit^[s] intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.^[t]

Here's what I know...the Spirit cried out as Floyd George moaned and said over and over I can't breathe. The Spirit cries out with our African American brothers and sisters and other people of color as they rage at the centuries of injustice due to racism, individual and overt, systemic and covert.

The Spirit cries out with the lower income workers who have disproportionately been infected by the coronavirus.

The Spirit cries out with the elderly and sick who have disproportionately died from coronavirus.

But the Spirit also cries out with Derik Chauvin as he awaits trial. The spirit cries out with law enforcement officers, the good and the bad. The Spirit cries out with police and National Guard members as they try to restore order and prevent death.

In the midst of almost more than we can bear, that Spirit continues to groan and cry with us and in us, with sighs too deep for words.

Are there others who would like to share their experience of God in the pandemic.

Prayers

I've done this sometimes in physically gathered worship when we really just need to trust the Spirit to intercede for us with something beyond words.

During the prayers today we will observe a time of silence.

During this time, pray however you need to pray. Out loud in your homes, silently, heck we're muted you can scream if you want.

Pray for law enforcement and others who try to restore some sense of order, but pray also for those whose rage against racism can never be quenched until racism is no more, in any form.

Pray for the issues surrounding covid 19 which have not magically gone away.

Or for whatever is on your heart.