

The Wild Goose Is Coming

ACTS 1:3-14



When I was growing up we lived about a block and a half from a little Pentecostal church. I can see it so clearly in my memory – small, white clapboard with a couple of cement steps leading up to the front door. I remember some summer nights when I was about five, my older siblings and I would sneak off from home – because we knew we weren’t supposed to be doing this – and crouch beneath the windows to listen to and catch glimpses of what seemed to us quite mysterious “goings on.” This was certainly not anything like what went on at First Baptist Church where we attended. Where did all that fervor come from – all the clapping and shouting? Yes, even dancing!

Where indeed? Let us pray: O, God, our style of worship is not so emotional. But at our core is our need for your Spirit seeking expression deep within us. May we recognize that need. May we yearn for your presence and seek your face. Amen.

When planning for this sermon, I first considered the lectionary. I also thought about the fact I would be preaching Mother’s Day. But Pentecost is next Sunday and I was drawn by my curiosity about the context of Pentecost, thus the verses Vanessa has shared leading up to Pentecost.

Should your memory of Pentecost need dusting up, Pentecost refers to the coming of the promised Holy Spirit, described as occurring 50 days following Jesus’ resurrection. I began to wonder what was going on during those 50 days. From the story as we receive it in the scriptures, just imagine: you are a disciple, you have followed Jesus, seen the growing crowds as people respond to him, witnessed miracles, been through harrowing episodes with his opposition, ultimately culminating in his arrest and crucifixion. You have experienced the fear following his death, the rumors swirling around the community, a brief episode of his return only to leave you again.

Imagine the mix of feelings you might have: disappointment, dejection, confusion, uncertainty per- haps?

Verse six describes the disciples, even after all they have been through and the preparation Jesus has attempted with them for his departure, asking, puzzled, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

Fifty days can be a very, very long time when you are waiting for an event, even more so when that event is immersed in uncertainty. I think immediately of the pregnancy with my daughter. I was huge, I was uncomfortable, I spent nearly every waking hour thinking about this baby, and many nights dreaming about her. Would I deliver a healthy baby? What did the future hold for this baby? You almost certainly think of things in your own life where you waited and wondered, per- haps with great anxiety.

But, in the midst of the unsettled situation the disciples face, they seem to rally. They return to Jerusalem, return to the room where they had been staying and here is the clincher: “All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.”

I wonder who was the first to say: “Hey, guys, let’s think about this: what would the master have us do?” (The original ‘WWJD’ you might say). And then they gather themselves together, go to a familiar place and enter into prayer. In the verses following this morning’s scripture they choose Matthias to replace Judas. These folks are not letting any grass grow under their feet. They are focused. They are devoted to prayer. They are preparing for the wild goose.

Now you may be wondering “What did she just say? I thought I was here for a sermon, not a cooking show.” So let me be clear that I did not say “preparing the wild goose” but “preparing for the wild goose.”

We always think in terms of the symbol of the dove for the Holy Spirit. But Celtic Christians decided the wild goose was a far more apt symbol of the Holy Spirit. Think about that. Do we think of as bearers of peace, a role we should certainly aspire to? But what images come to you when you think of geese? They are beautiful in flight but have you ever heard them honking? They are quite noisy. They have been known to be used as a kind of early warning system. There’s an ancient story that it was the loud cackling of a flock of geese that alerted sentries in Rome to an invading army creeping up to the walls in the middle of the night. Throughout history, whenever the church has lapsed into complacency, some spirit filled people seem to begin honking! In our passage today, the disciples are about to get introduced to this spirit which has inspired us through the ages.

And so as the disciples lay the groundwork for the arrival of the spirit, they open themselves to prayer. Don’t you just wonder what those prayers might have been like? I just imagine them pouring out their hearts with the frustration and fear and anger about what has happened, then, spent, offering themselves to God, thanking God for sustaining them, putting words to the hope that survives within them even in the midst of confusion. Thus they prepare themselves for the challenges of where a wild goose spirit might take them.

The origin of the phrase wild goose chase originated in the 16th century from a horse race in which the riders were to follow the lead horse wherever it chose to go. The disciples had been through some rather wild times already with Jesus, seeing as how he had a knack for offending the religious establishment and sometimes they had to get out of Dodge pretty quickly. And, of course, they had only recently been through the drama at Gethsemane and the dreadful hours following. Presumably they were still in recovery from that. But now they were on alert for the spirit . . . preparing for where that might lead . . . the same Spirit available to us . . . the same wild goose that can lead us to some interesting places, places we wouldn’t have dreamed we would go, perhaps wouldn’t have dared to go.

So here is the challenge: Are we willing both to withdraw into quiet reflection for the kind of prayer which centers us and also to go from that center out into the world bearing God’s Spirit? While many of us might have been willing to stay safely in this refuge till the storm blew over, the situation calmed down, it seems quite apparent from their actions in the weeks following this passage that the disciples were not expecting to stay holed up in that room where they had re-treated. Anticipating the arrival of the wild goose, they re-treated, re-grouped, re-emerged renewed, ready to re-engage a world that they knew could be quite hostile to them.

And this, it seems to me, is our perpetual task: to withdraw to prayer and to return to the world renewed, Spirit-filled, Spirit-led, prepared for God's wild goose chase. The disciples give us the model for this: seek the strength of your companions on this journey; find quiet spaces to make room for and listen for God's Spirit; be willing and ready to take on whatever challenges you encounter; focus on living out the gospel, the living gospel which cannot be contained or controlled.

I find myself circling back to a previous sermon. Maybe that is the nature of preaching, that one seeks new means to connect the dots between scripture and life and also turns to previous messages for points that seem to bear repeating. Maybe this is what I will always want to emphasize: That whatever we accomplish we do through God's Spirit, God's energy, God's love. And those upon whom the spirit rests are compelled by that spirit to become like wild geese – noisy, passionate and courageous advocates of the gospel's radical demands.

Thanks be to God for a compelling gospel and for that wild goose spirit that leads us on the faith adventure. Amen.

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