

We are all looking for a fresh breath of Spirit, a fresh breath of Holy Spirit. This is Pentecost season, and we remember from last week the story of the rush of wind, and energy like flames of fire dancing on people’s heads! Well, we continue this week with more images of the divine Spirit, and Jesus saying that being part of the “Kingdom of God” involves being born again, born anew, born “from above.” There is the possibility of “higher” spiritual living, all the things of peace and love and joy, but Jesus also speaks of being born of “water.”

Most scholars on the Gospel of John agree that, mentioning “water,” Jesus is probably referring to John the Baptist’s baptizing in the River Jordan. So many symbols in the Bible, and so many synonyms or similar words and symbols! It seems there are two kinds of baptisms mentioned by Jesus and John the Baptist. The first has to do with a basic move of “Repentance” or Confession, and the second has to do with receiving the spirit of grace and peace. That first movement of Repentance and Confession shows up in all of Holy Scripture.

In Isaiah Chapter 6, part of this Sunday’s scripture lessons, Isaiah is telling about his own “conversion” and calling, a very high and difficult calling. Notice that the very first thing in his calling is his identification with his people; he says “I am a man of unclean lips, in the midst of a people with unclean lips.” Confession! We often quote the scripture from Paul, “All have fallen short of the glory of God.” Yes, sin is a universal reality. Notice the imagery ... Isaiah identifies the mouth and lips, obviously the speech, the choice of words, that can cause harm.

And notice the memorable imagery for how God transforms the lips and the speech of Isaiah. The winged heavenly creature, the seraph, grabs a live coal from the fire on God’s altar, with tongs, and brings it over to touch the prophet’s mouth! Ouch! It reminds me of what many mothers often said when I was growing up, Do you want

me to wash your mouth out with soap? Not as dangerous as burning coals, but surely memorable, even if only a threat. The Hebrew prophets often called God’s word a “refining fire” so we accept that part of a universal spiritual “transformation” is cleansing (the symbol of water), sometimes even burning or cutting out (the symbol of fire), of things that do not serve life well.

We remember Jesus difficult words also, surely a non-literal but strong image, that if your eye or hand causes you to sin, you will be better off removing the eye or hand than allowing it to cause harm. We remember that Jesus also said “The truth will set you free,” and we recall modern prophets saying, but it may sting before it sets you free. The symbols of this Spirit of Truth are strong: water for cleansing, fire for burning out or cutting out.

On to the second movement of the spirit, the higher calling, living in the Spirit: the mercy, the forgiveness, the fresh start, the re-birth, being born “from above” with more hope, peace, love and joy, and seeing deeper truths in this life. The context around Isaiah’s vision is that the Israeli people could have new eyes and new ears, spiritual eyes and spiritual ears.

Both Jesus and Isaiah challenged the people to look and listen for deeper realities.... That could include visions and dreams that we could live into. I’m not going to make a distinction here between visions and dreams, and if we were very literal with the Pentecost story, we could insist that the young are the ones with the visions and the elderly are the ones with the dreams! Suffice it to say, that according to Peter’s Pentecost sermon, the Spirit can and will be poured out on ALL flesh, that the Holy Spirit’s gift is new visions and dreams in the community of God.

I’ve encouraged us often to keep reading and looking and listening to our modern day prophets; one that I really enjoy following is Rev. Kenneth Samuel, at Victory Church in Stone Mountain, GA. He and I both wrote articles recently about making a Case for God with

our atheist and agnostic friends. Mine made the local paper Friday May 28, and his made the UCC daily devotions the next day, Saturday. I emphasized looking for the spirit of love and goodness which is surely present in this world. Rev. Samuel emphasized things of love and beauty and meaning that are beyond reason, beyond rational proof or logic, thus a faith that may seem foolish to many in this world. A faith that inspired people to great courage... like Martin Luther King, like Congressman John Lewis, like Bishop Demond Tutu in South Africa, like Ghandi in India, perhaps also like Alexei Navalny in Russia ... someone who will dare to speak truth... with a courage coming from way beyond normal human courage or reasoning. Such demonstrations of courage are a “Case for God” a witness to a God or Holy Spirit beyond our normal human abilities, a divine gift.

In conclusion, we need to continually be open to being born again in Spirit, born from above, again and again. For sin and temptation to sin never go away, thus the need for a burning coal, or cleansing water, never goes away. We are lost and found over and over, born again over and over, we are saved over and over. We are healed and empowered over and over, to be sent into a world of woe, like Isaiah was sent, like Jesus was sent.

It reminds me of a song by Brian Serchio, another modern day prophet, born and full of the Spirit, called “Dream God’s Dream,” We dedicate ourselves to moving into the future, born anew, of both water and Spirit, always open to new visions and new dreams.

Chorus of the song “Dream God’s Dream”

*Dream God’s dream! Holy Spirit help us dream... of a world where there is justice, and where everyone is free... to build and grow and love, and to simply have enough. The world will change, when we dream God’s dream.*