

A Wild Goose Pentecost

Pentecost Sunday

John 14:25-26; 20:19-23 Acts 2:1-21
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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How do you describe the indescribable? Humans have faced this dilemma since the dawn of time. The most common way is by analogy or metaphor, using a common image as a symbol to describe the characteristics of that which defies description. Trying to describe the nature and character of the Divine has been, and continues to be, and always will be among the most perplexing. For any words or images are, of course, woefully inadequate.

None of that stopped biblical authors, however, from using a variety of images and metaphors to describe the Divine. On this Pentecost Sunday, I want us to focus on the Holy Spirit.

In the Bible, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, has been compared to the wind, to breath, to tongues of fire, and has been described as the Advocate and Comforter and Teacher. **The Holy Spirit is also how many of us refer to the experience of the Sacred Presence of God in their midst.** The most common image and symbol of the Holy Spirit is a dove descending from heaven, like in the story of Jesus' baptism. Though inadequate, images, metaphors and symbols are important, because they're all we have. And for those of us progressives who aren't comfortable with how Christianity has tended to literalize God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the search continues.

So this morning I'd like to introduce what might be a new image to you for the Holy Spirit. It comes from the **Celtic tradition, who call it, "An Geadh-Glas."** For those of you not fluent in the Gaelic language it refers to **a wild goose**. A recent representation of that, by Hilary Ann Golden, appears on the cover of your worship bulletin.

The first thing many of us think of in connection with the term "wild goose" is the old phrase "wild goose chase". Who among us hasn't been on our share of wild goose chases? You know, those times when we're out searching for something only to find out that all the time we spent turns out to be nothing more than a tedious, unproductive, unfruitful pursuit. Have you ever tried to chase down a wild goose? I've missed that experience, but I suppose that if it doesn't chase you down first, then it will turn out to a fruitless endeavor of trying to catch something that cannot be easily tracked, let alone tamed.

So how is the Holy Spirit of God like a wild goose? Now, it's not often that I recommend books written by conservative evangelical authors. That's mainly because a majority with that perspective come with a theological assumption of an interventionist God whose absolute sovereignty over the universe verges on the control of all things, or at least allowing things to happen for some divine purpose. In other words, the historical Presbyterian perspective. I'm not here today to argue that from a progressive theological perspective. That's another sermon. But in my research on the Celtic understanding of the Holy Spirit, I came across a book appropriately entitled, **Wild Goose Chase: Reclaim the Adventure of Pursuing God.** I liked that title, so I

decided to look deeper. It was written in 2008 by **Mark Batterson**, who serves as the lead pastor of National Community Church in Washington, D.C.

Batterson begins by reflecting upon **how organized religion often tends to tame people, leading to a very domesticated kind of experience with God**. Many of us can probably relate to that sentiment. He goes as far as **comparing the spiritual lives of most Christians to zoo animals that are caged**. Wondering if the Church does to Christians what zoos do to animals, he suggests that we often live in cages that keep us from living the true adventure to which God has called us.

Batterson goes on to identify **six 'cages'** or areas of restraint, and possibly excuses, in the lives of Christians for not living on the wild side of faith. To each cage he devotes a chapter. They are the **cage of responsibility, routine, assumptions, guilt, failure and fear**. Living in these cages prevents us from chasing after the Wild Goose. Here are a few examples.

The cage of guilt keeps us so focused on what we have done wrong in the past that we don't have any emotional or spiritual energy to really concentrate on the present, let alone think about what might lie ahead in the future. Forgiveness, especially of oneself, is a big key in unlocking that cage.

The cage of responsibility reveals that when we get so buried beneath our responsibilities in life, it can lead to a passionless life of mediocrity. Therefore, identifying our God ordained passions – doing what we love and feel called to do – helps us break free from this cage.

The cage of routine can eventually lead to a life of just going through the motions – physically, emotionally, and spiritually. He offers this nugget of wisdom, **“a change of pace plus a change of place equals change of perspective.”**

Perhaps it would help if you and I shake things up a bit in order to live life fully as God intends. Nineteenth century Danish philosopher and theologian **Soren Kierkegaard said that boredom is the root of all evil**. (Now that's worth thinking about, deserving it own sermon.) “Take the Holy Spirit out of the equation of my life,” Batterson writes, “and it would spell b-o-r-i-n-g.” Life should be spelled A-d-v-e-n-t-u-r-e. In a YouTube video segment promoting his book, he says, **“The safety of the cage never satisfies. People want something more than that. I think there is this primal longing for spiritual adventure.** To live our lives in a way that has an element of danger.”

So let me ask: **Are you bored with your faith or your religious life?** Perhaps we all could use an element of being un-caged and set free into the wild of our personal and congregational life. Perhaps we need to break free from whatever is holding us back from serving God whole-heartedly, from whatever is preventing us from pursuing the Wild Goose with wild abandon. The Celtic image of the Holy Spirit as a Wild Goose can serve as a spiritual kick in the pants to get an often-apatetic life or community of faith up and moving. After all, we can't restrain a wild goose (the Holy Spirit) and bend it to our will. Many have tried and failed. As Hilary Ann Golden writes, the Holy Spirit, like **“a Wild Goose, is always on the move, always doing unexpected things; it is loud, passionate, sometimes frightening, and certainly unsettling.” Maybe we need a bit more of that understanding of God in our journey of faith.**

To further the metaphor I'm going to close with two brief poems from the modern Celtic tradition. The first is a prayer by Ray Simpson, Guardian of the Community of Aidan and Hilda on the Holy Island of Lindisfarne, UK. It's kind of a sister community of Iona, Scotland.

*Holy Spirit, Wild Goose
Great Spirit, Wild Goose of the Almighty
Be my eye in the dark places;
Be my flight in the trapped places;
Be my host in the wild places;
Be my brood in the barren places;
Be my formation in the lost places.*

And a poem written by Sally Coleman, a Methodist minister, entitled *An Geadh-Glas* – again, the Gaelic term for Wild Goose.

*I feel the
Beat of your wings
Stirring the air
Around me,
Awakening my slumbering spirit,
Calling me . . .
To rise
To follow . . .*

*I hear your call,
Behind me, and
Before me,
The call of adventure,
The call to fullness
Of life!*

*Free me O Wild One,
From these chains
Of complacency
And the shackles
of comfort I have made.*

*Free me O Wild One
For I choose to Release my heart, and
To follow you again.*

*Stir me,
Call me,
Free me,
Release me.
Come O Wild One,
Come.*

May it be so. Amen.

Resources:

Hilary Ann Golden, *Chasing the Wild Goose: A Pentecost Adventure*,
David C. Stancil, *An Geadh-Gas*
http://dcstancil.com/yahoo_site_admin/assets/docs/An_Geadh-Glas.138184343.pdf
<http://wildgoosedove.blogspot.com>