

Turning Rocks into Snowflakes
The Day of Pentecost
May 23, 2021
The Rev. Paul McLain

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

The best teachers can help us see the world in a completely different way. That is true of Phil LeCuyer, a tutor at St. John's College. The professors there are called tutors.

One night during a seminar on Homer's great epic poem, *The Iliad*, Mr. LeCuyer invited us to notice a passage in which Homer uses metaphor and simile to compare the throwing of rocks over a wall to a snowfall. Before in my reading of *The Iliad*, I had been quickly moving from one battle scene to another, concentrating on the plot of the story, seeking to answer the questions: Who is winning or will win the war? How is this story useful to me? After Mr. LeCuyer challenged our class to stay with this one passage for a while I could stop and see the loud, violent action of these hurling rocks turn into the quiet, gentle floating of snowflakes.

The jarring image of the destructive rocks being hurled against enemy soldiers gave way to the beauty of banks of snow drifts slowly filling up around mountains and lowlands. I began to wonder. Is war natural or unnatural? Can there even be beauty in war? But mostly, I took a deep breath before I moved on to the next passage. I stayed with this image of the rocks becoming snowflakes. And I gave it time to permeate me in such a way that I still carry that image with me almost 20 years later, even though I don't fully understand what it means. Homer and Mr. LeCuyer taught me to slow down, stay in the moment, and breathe.

In our scripture reading from Acts today, the Holy Spirit came as a powerful, violent wind, with images of flaming tongues of blazing fire, and loud voices crying out in different languages. But in the Gospel of John the Spirit is depicted in a quiet, more intimate way. The resurrected Jesus gave his disciples the Holy Spirit by simply breathing on them.

And, in our passage from John today, the Spirit is given a different name, translated as Advocate, Helper, Counselor, Comforter, or Companion. I identify most with Companion because Jesus is telling the disciples, and us, that the journey is just getting started. There are many more steps to walk. And what we yearn for more than anything is a companion to walk beside us. Jesus tells them, and us, that this companion will guide us into all truth. The Greek word for truth actually means uncovering or unveiling.

Judith McDaniel writes of the ways we teach and learn, 'What we do is plaster over – not uncovering but covering a topic.' By that she means, we skim to find the main points that we believe to be somehow useful to us. She challenges us to move beyond an approach based on

utility to one based on revelation – to give space and time to see that which may be hidden from plain sight that could be little glimmers of the reality and presence of God.

In the church, we often talk about such uncovering as discernment. It is a drawing or a ‘teasing’ out of the truth. It is listening for the ‘still, small voice within us.’

It is hard for us to get to the truth of the Holy Spirit. We use metaphors like the dove, wind, and fire. Each is something outward that has an uncontrollable quality – the ability to change its course suddenly, and move swiftly in a totally different direction. But when we seek to uncover the dove, wind, and fire, we find a tiny, unseeable force that gives them their true essence - air.

The dove needs to both breathe in air and use its friction to flap her wings. Wind is the movement of pockets of air, beginning with a tiny breeze. And fire would be nothing without air.

A parishioner shared these words from a poem entitled ‘Fire’ by Judy Brown – ‘What makes a fire burn is space between the logs, a breathing space. Too much of a good thing, too many logs packed in too tight can douse the flames almost as surely as a pail of water would. So building fires requires attention to the spaces in between, as much as to the wood.’

The space between the logs. I think that is where we find the Holy Spirit. It is in the deep breaths between actions. It is in the silences between words and music. It is in the rocks turned into snowflakes.

Today we baptize Julia Louise. One of the prayers we will offer for her is: ‘Fill her with your holy and life-giving Spirit.’ While we hope she is and will be filled with the Spirit, I hope she, her parents, her godparents, and all of us don’t pack her logs too tight. I hope she and we give her room and space to breathe – to grow and encounter God in her own ways, whether it be in words, in art, in nature, in mission, or in a simple embrace with someone she loves. I pray she is blessed with some teachers along the way like Phil LeCuyer, that invite and challenge her to see the world differently.

As marked by our opening of more spaces for worship today, we are inching our way toward re-entry. The open question is – what gifts will we bring forward with us from this strange time of the pandemic?

Many have observed that it has been good to give the earth and ourselves ‘a breather’ over this past year. As we move closer to a new normal, may we remember to find a way to slow down the action, to take a few deep breaths along the way, and to uncover a hidden glimmer of truth. May we leave a little space between the logs, and perhaps even, turn rocks into snowflakes. *Amen.*