

**Laggan and Newtonmore
Parish Church of Scotland**

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Let go, let be, let come.

John 3:1-10

Romans 6:1-14

Over the autumn, as we walk a path of renewal, we are going to be considering what it means that we live by God's Spirit. In many ways, living by God's Spirit, is where the rubber hits the road in terms of being a Christian. We can know all that there is to know about what the Bible tells us about God the creator and sustainer of all, and about Jesus, who is, incredibly, God made visible and tangible, God made fully human, who shows us what humanity looks like when immersed in God. But that is just head knowledge. It is only when we open our hearts to God and ask that God's Spirit live in us – even as God's Spirit lived in Jesus – isn't that an amazing thought? – that we begin to do more than live with knowledge of, but also live with experience of God.

When you think of it, what I have just said is completely mind-blowing: that we can live with experience of God himself. But when we are dealing with the Holy Spirit of God, our minds are set to be expanded and blown open over and over again!

We have thought a lot about the first disciples over the past months, as we have looked at Jesus' pattern of recruiting and training and using people. They were just like us, with one exception – they could point to the man who was Jesus. "I'm talking about him" was the burden of their message. We tend to think of that exception as an advantage that they had. But you know, Jesus didn't think of it that way. He actually told them that "It is better that I go away so that the Spirit can come." And why? Because when you could point to the physical Jesus, you were saying God is there, right there, over there. But when Jesus leaves the circles of the world, we discover the Spirit of Christ right here, in here, within.

Jesus describes the Spirit as another. Another comforter, another teacher, another guide. Just like him, in other words, but available to everyone,

everywhere, always. He promises that the Spirit who had descended on him as a dove will descend on us. The same Spirit – the same, not an inferior version – who filled him will fill us as well.

We read a passage today from one of Paul's letters. As far as we know, Paul never saw Jesus in the flesh – he certainly wasn't one of his earthly followers. But Paul did experience the Spirit of Christ. And what he knew is what we also can know. The Spirit of Christ transformed him, from a proud and violent agitator of hostility to a tireless activist for reconciliation. We couldn't read all the passages in which he references the indwelling of God's Spirit in our service today (well, we could have, but we didn't! There are quite a lot.) but if you read through his writings you will see that his experience of God's Spirit within him meant that he saw himself as living within Christ and looking out through Christ's eyes upon the world. Just as those of us who wear glasses or lenses look out at the world through them and the world is brought into focus for us by them, so Paul looked out through the lenses of Christ and that brought the world into focus for him.

I in Christ, said Paul, and Christ in me.

The bit we read today talks of how life in the Spirit of God means a threefold sharing in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. First, as we turn from old habits and old patterns, our "old self" with all its pride, greed, lust, anger, prejudice and hostility dies with Christ. "What is born of the flesh is flesh," said Jesus. That former identity with all its hostilities is nailed to the cross and left behind (sometimes we have to remind ourselves of this, and not try to take it down off the cross and allow it to go on with us). In this way life in the Spirit involves a profound experience of letting go of what has been so far.

Then, Paul says, we join Jesus in the powerlessness and defeat of burial, which is symbolised by baptism. We experience that burial as a surrender to silence, stillness, powerlessness, emptiness and rest. There are things we cannot do by ourselves or for ourselves. We need to acknowledge that. It is a letting be.

Then we join Jesus in the dynamic, surprising uprising of resurrection. The surrender, silence, emptiness and rest of letting go and letting be make us receptive to something new. Like a vacuum (which nature abhors, if you remember your science) that receptivity welcomes infilling and activation, and so we experience the letting come of the Spirit of God. "What is born of the Spirit, is Spirit," said Jesus.

The coming of God's Spirit is all about movement. The images that the Bible uses for God's Spirit are beautiful and active: wind, breath, fire, cloud,

water, wine, a dove. These dynamic word pictures contrast starkly with the heavy fixed imagery provided by, for instance, stone idols, imposing temples or thick theological tomes. Through this vivid imagery, the Bible writers tell us that the Spirit invigorates, animates, purifies, holds mystery, moves and flows, initiates joy and spreads peace.

The Spirit of God is not simply a New Testament idea. God's Spirit is present and active from the beginning of time. For example, in the first chapter of Genesis God's Spirit hovers over the primal waters like wind, creating beauty and novelty out of chaos. The Spirit then activates the living creatures like breath, an image of God's Spirit used much later by the prophet Ezekiel, when he had his vision of dry bones becoming clothed in life. In Exodus God's Spirit appears as fire in the burning bush, calling Moses onwards, and then calls the people onwards as a pillar of cloud and fire in the wilderness, cooling by day and warming by night, leading the way to freedom.

Centuries later, when John the Baptist comes on the scene, he says that just as he immerses and marks people with water, his successor will immerse and mark with the Holy Spirit, and when John baptises Jesus, they see the Spirit descending like a dove on him. Jesus himself promises that if people trust him, they will experience refreshment like rivers of living water springing up from within. Because what is born of the flesh is flesh but what is born of the Spirit is Spirit.

At the core of Jesus' life and message, then, was this good news: the Spirit of God, the Spirit of God's life and breath, the wind-breath-fire-cloud-water-wine-dove Spirit who filled Jesus is on the move in the world. And that gives us a choice: do we dig in our heels, clench our fists and live for our own agenda – that is the way of the world, that is the way of what Jesus calls flesh – that is the way that we are expected to live and the way that our society works (or that is the reason why our society so often fails to work, because each one lives for his or her own agenda with great determination). So do we do that, or do we let go, let be and let come, and so be taken up into the Spirit's movement?

An awful lot of the church has got itself into the awful bad habit of only considering the Spirit of God when we mark the Day of Pentecost – forty days after Easter. That was a really important day, of course, the day when the disciples first experienced God's Spirit within them, God within them. But if it were a one-off it would be remarkable but not important. On that day these Jewish disciples learned by the gift of languages, that God is multilingual. God's Spirit is not restricted to one elite language (not even Gaelic, which is sometimes called the language of heaven!), nor is God

restricted to one superior culture, as almost everyone had assumed. The Spirit speaks to everyone in his or her native tongue.

In the centuries since Christ walked with us on this earth his followers have so often failed him by trying to box up the “wind” in manageable doctrines, rejecting mystery for certainty. We have exchanged the fire of the Spirit for the ice of religious pride. We’ve traded the gentle dove of peace for the predatory hawk or eagle of empire. When we have done so, we have ended up with just another religious system, as problematic as any other: too often petty, argumentative, judgemental, cold, hostile, bureaucratic, self-seeking and the reverse of alive.

But we live in a world of big challenges, and in a time of unparalleled change, and so we cannot settle for a heavy and fixed religion. We can’t try to contain the Spirit of God in a box. We need to experience the rushing wind of Pentecost. We need to have our hearts set on fire. We need the living water and the new wine that Jesus promised so that our hearts can become the home of dove-like peace.

Wind. Breath. Fire. Cloud. Water. Wine. A dove. When we open up space for the Spirit and let the Spirit fill that space within us, we begin to change, and we begin to become agents of change. We find that we are living in a place of constant renewal.

But it begins with us being prepared to let go. It begins with us remembering that we have in fact died with Christ and that the past, however appalling or however well-meaning no longer holds us. It begins with us letting go, not pluming ourselves on what we have done or been any more than we live with constant regret.

And then it continues with us remembering that we are buried with Christ, with us stilling our restless hearts and letting be.

And then, only then, are we willing to rise with Christ? Can we inhale, open our emptiness, unlock our inner vacuum for the Spirit to enter and fill – like wind, breath, fire, cloud, water, wine and a dove? Are we willing to let God, God himself, come?

Letting go, letting be and letting come. We need to do it often, to keep in step with God’s Spirit. You could try using a breathing pattern – exhaling to let go, spending a few seconds breathless to let be and then inhaling to let God’s Spirit come.

We need to do it alone with God as individuals, but we also need to do it as a Church. And we do. In fact it is how our service is shaped, that as we

come into worship we let go, we think of our failures and hurts and give them to God in prayer. Then as we read scripture and think about it we let be, allowing the word of God (which is Jesus even more than it is the Bible) to do its work on us to do in us and for us what we cannot do for ourselves. And then in prayer – or some weeks in communion – we inhale God's Spirit to go on walking forward in his leading and his light.

God grant that we learn to walk by his Spirit more each day. Amen