

Viriditas and the Holy Spirit

- Friends, this morning we have another opportunity to continue the journey we've been on these last weeks of exploring our sacred relationships with nature—what nature is, and how we might encounter and relate to the natural world from our spiritual grounding
- Last week gave us a unique opportunity to explore how this sacred side of our relationships with nature coincides with our Mother's Day focus, and this week also presents us with a special focus, as today is Pentecost
 - We celebrate today the miraculous in-pouring of the Holy Spirit, this pivotal miracle in the growth of the early church described in this morning's passage from Acts
- The disciples here are in a time of uncertainty that's difficult for us to imagine
 - This is just weeks after Jesus's death, resurrection, and ascension
 - They know they've been sent forth by Jesus to minister to the world, but they're just at the very cusp of that work, at the very start of it
 - They're in a sort of in-between phase in this moment
- In that space, the time comes to celebrate what they at the time might call the Feast of Weeks, or the Feast of Harvest, or the day of firstfruits
 - Originally this festival was held 50 days after the first day after the first springtime harvest of grain, though it later came to be celebrated specifically fifty days from Passover
 - This would be the time of the spring wheat harvest, when the fruits are gathered of what has been sown

- This holy day was a time of pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and so in our passage today, the city is bustling with activity and filled with folks hailing from all over the region
- And the disciples are gathered together here in Jerusalem, waiting
 - Earlier in Acts 1:4-8, Jesus instructed the disciples in this waiting, saying:
 - “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”
- And then we come to the miracle of Pentecost
 - The Holy Spirit rushes into their gathering, like a “violent fiery wind” scripture says, and touches each of those gathered
 - Then, touched and filled with the Holy Spirit, all of the disciples gathered began to speak in languages not their own, languages they presumably didn’t know—speaking about God, about Jesus, giving witness to their experiences
 - And all those around the building outside, crowds of people from all different areas, representing a whole broad array of languages—everyone heard someone speaking in their own language, even though they knew the gathering was just a bunch of folks from Galilee
- Pentecost is all about the presence of the Holy Spirit touching us, transforming us, giving life to our discipleship, faith, and ministry
 - And so we have today an opportunity to ask—how might our focus on the Holy Spirit intersect with our explorations of nature?

- To begin, we can reflect on how the very language we use to speak about the Holy Spirit is rooted in metaphors of nature
 - The Hebrew phrases for the Holy Spirit are *ruach ha-kodesh*, literally meaning “sacred wind” or “sacred breath,” or *ruach elohim*, literally meaning “wind of God” or “breath of God”
 - In Greek scriptures, the *pneuma* that refers to the Holy Spirit again literally means “wind” or “breath”
 - Even our English “Holy Spirit” retains those same roots
 - “Spirit” comes from Latin roots of “to breathe,” roots that also give us words like respiration
 - The language of the Holy Spirit already begins to draw connections to the natural world in wind and breath, and those connections are traced even more clearly in the ways that scripture talks about the life-giving presence of this sacred wind, this breath of God
- The very first verses of scripture’s creation stories emphasizes this Divine wind alive and breathing in the acts of creation
 - In Genesis 1:2 we read:
 - “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the *ruach elohim*, the Spirit of God, was hovering over the waters.”
 - In Genesis 2:7, this holy breath of God is what first gives life to humanity:
 - “Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.”
- Scripture emphasizes that this sacred wind, this breath of God doesn’t just spark the life of human beings, it’s also present in sustaining and forwarding our life

- In the Book of Job, we hear this active presence of God's breath in chapter 27 verse 3, where Job says to his friends:
 - "as long as I have life within me,
the breath of God in my nostrils,"
- And later, one of Job's friends reflects a similar view; Job 33:4 reads:
 - "The Spirit of God has made me;
the breath of the Almighty gives me life."
- And this life-giving and life-sustaining breath of God isn't reserved only for humanity in scripture; the sacred wind blows through all life on Earth
 - The story of the great flood in Genesis speaks of life in nature in this way
 - When God speaks of the flood that will wipe out life in Genesis 6:17, we hear God saying:
 - "I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life under the heavens, every creature that has the breath of life in it."
 - And again in Genesis 7:22 when the flood waters rage, we read that:
 - "Everything on dry land that had the breath of life in its nostrils died. Every living thing on the face of the earth was wiped out"
 - But this Divine breath that is snuffed out by the floodwaters is the same wind that begins to make way for life and nature once again; in Genesis 8:1 we read:
 - "God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark, and he sent *ruach*, a wind, over the earth, and the waters receded."

- Moses also refers to this breath of God, this Holy Spirit, as being the source and sustenance of all life, repeatedly addressing God as “the God who gives *ruach*, breath, to all living things”
- As I’ve been thinking about this life-giving and life-sustaining sacred breath of God, I’ve been reminded of the writings of Hildegard von Bingen
 - Hildegard von Bingen lived in the 11th and 12th centuries; she was a German mystic, writer, theologian, musician, and so much more
 - Hildegard’s writings often engaged with the intersection of spirituality and nature, and she’s often regarded as one of the founding figures in the science of natural history in Europe
- One concept central in Hildegard von Bingen’s work is *viriditas*, a word we might literally translate as “greenness” or “greenifying”
 - For Hildegard, this *viriditas* is the “greenifying” force of life in nature, that which spurs the growth of plants around us, their vitality and fruitfulness
 - This “greenifying” *viriditas* is alive in the natural world of plants, but Hildegard also describes it as being the driving force of life and vitality for all of nature, including the life of human beings
 - Hildegard describes *viriditas* not just as being a characteristic of nature but also as a defining attribute of God’s nature and the Divine presence alive in the world
 - The “greenifying” *viriditas* that sparks and sustains life in nature is the life-giving activity of Spirit
- That *viriditas*, it starts to sound like the fruits of the Holy Spirit, doesn’t it?
 - God breathes into us a sacred wind, and *viriditas* is the result

- This Pentecost, as our thoughts turn to the sacred wind of the Holy Spirit, we might look to the greenifying nature around us to see the living presence of that same Holy Spirit
 - When we step outside to see that new flowers have bloomed overnight, we witness the *viriditas* fruits of the Holy Spirit
 - When we see new buds forming on the branches of trees, we see the Holy Spirit breathing life into the world
 - When we awake each morning with breath in our lungs and life in our bodies, we too are enlivened in that *viriditas* of God's sacred breath
- And so friends, let us open ourselves to the living wonders of the Holy Spirit around us
 - As we step out from this building and are struck by the life of nature surrounding us, let us witness in it the “greenifying” *viriditas*, the life-giving breath of God
 - And let us give prayerful thanks to our God, the God who gives *ruach*, gives *pneuma*, gives spirit and breath to all living things—let us give thanks to God for this living presence of the Holy Spirit