

May 31, 2009
The Day of Pentecost
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THE GOD SPOT

Is God in your head? How do we explain things like spiritual experiences? Polls suggest that 50% of people have had one. A time when you had an overwhelming feeling of God's presence or a time when you were connected to another dimension of reality.

The first Pentecost was quite a powerful spiritual experience. When the Holy Spirit descended all kinds of extraordinary, vivid and sensory things happened. There was the rush of a mighty wind. Tongues of fire. Speaking in strange languages. Not the kind of things that happen here during our more restrained Sunday morning liturgy.

But one kind of Christianity is all about these kind of spiritual experiences. Pentecostals have a very vibrant style of worship that includes speaking in tongues, getting baptized in the Spirit, prophecies, miraculous healings and other gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Clearly people experience God in many different ways. Or sometimes not at all. What makes some people have mystical experiences? Why do some people hear God talking directly to them? Is it from drugs or mental illness? Or are some people just more God-wired than others?

A couple of weeks ago I heard an NPR story about scientists who wonder if there is a sweet spot in the brain for spirituality. Do these spiritual experiences really happen or are they just in our heads? Some scientists say the answer might be both. 2500 years ago epilepsy was considered sacred because sufferers were either possessed by demons or blessed by divine messages or visions. When people have a seizure in the temporal lobe of the brain, it's as if the normal emotions have an exclamation point after them. It's because so many nerve cells are firing in rhythm. From these observations we learn what part of the brain is involved when we have a so-called spiritual experience. (Reported by Barbara Bradley Haggerdy on "All Things Considered," National Public Radio, May 18, 2009)

Maybe that's what happened when Moses encountered the burning bush. Or when Jesus appeared to Paul on the Damascus Road. Or, getting to today's readings, when Ezekiel had a vision of the valley of dry bones. And when the followers of Jesus felt the presence of the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues.

A God spot in the temporal lobe? Does it make it less real? One scientist said that when two people in love look at each other, their temporal lobes are probably firing up as well! This information is drawing this scientist more into spirituality rather than away from it. Previously non-religious, he has turned to Buddhism to harness his spiritual life. He says he doesn't care where it comes from, if it makes him a happier person and a more decent human being.

Since it's Pentecost, maybe we could use spiritual language to say that the Holy Spirit is our God spot, the way we experience the fire of God in our hearts and the passion of life in our bodies.

In the Hebrew scriptures, the spirit is the breath of God. In Ezekiel's vision the spirit breathes into the dry bones and they come to life. They are reanimated with resurrection, new life, and hope. Maybe our breath is the God spot, the place where the spirit reenergizes us. No wonder so many spiritual traditions are all about the breath!

Yet for Christians, we would have to say that for us, the ultimate God spot is Jesus. For in him we most fully see the divine. And yet, where is he now? Our gospel reminds us that though he has gone away, he has come again in the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Spirit of truth. But where is the Spirit? There is not just one holy place, holy temple, holy person, no singular God spot. That's the point of Pentecost! The Spirit is unleashed in all the earth. In the rich diversity of peoples, nations, languages, cultures and yes, even religions.

Let's say it another way. The Spirit of God isn't just in my head. That would simply be my own subjective experience. We say that the Holy Spirit comes to us in community. Not only do we need the many voices, interpretations and life experience of those in this congregation. But the many different forms of worship, different styles of music, and different kinds of beliefs in the Church around the world reveal that the mystery of God is so much larger than any one of us alone.

For many of us, this place is our weekly God spot, the place where our spirits are fed and nourished. In the word, around the water, and at the table we experience the Spirit that makes us one and then sends us forth to serve boldly in the world.

Pentecost is the culmination of Easter. It is Easter grown up, if you will. Pentecost is Easter extending to the ends of the earth. We are now God spots in all the places where we live and work. Imagine looking at the earth from space and seeing all those God spots, all those places, firing up and lighting up like the nerve cells in our temporal lobe. Think of the millions of people around the globe who are filled with the Spirit and who live out their baptismal faith with fiery passion.

In our community, we give thanks for one of those saints today. Bob Buzzard has been our administrative assistant for 17 years, and as he retires we thank him today for his faithful service. More than just a job for him, Bob has had a passion for this congregation and its ministry. As Holy Trinity became a spot for spiritual renewal and growth over the years, Bob's support and hard work were essential to all the accomplishments here, including our Expansive Faith capital campaign.

We don't all speak in tongues or see visions. Sometimes we may be low on inspiration and may not feel very spiritual. There is great diversity among us, and the God spot in our brain may be one way to name it. And yet the Spirit of truth comes again this day to free our tongues for praise and to open our hearts to gratitude. And that same Spirit will open our eyes to the countless God spots in our lives and in the world!