A word about Pentecost: The word means "fiftieth day" in Greek. For Jews, the feast of Shavuot (Pentecost) comes fifty days after the feast of Passover and celebrates the giving of the Law to Moses and the people of Israel. Christian Jews quickly appropriated the fiftieth day to celebrate their own Pentecost, fifty days after Easter Sunday.

In Anglican lands and a few other places, Pentecost is known as Whitsunday, and I always wondered about the name, since the liturgical color is red, not white. Apparently, it got the name Whitsunday or White Sunday, from the white robes worn by those to be baptised on this high feast day. But one English priest, in about 1400, offered the idea that "whit" means "wit" -- not wit as in humor, but wit as in keeping your wits about you -- so that the wit and wisdom of the Holy Ghost were transferred to the Disciples on Pentecost.

This morning we've heard a lot about the Spirit at work, and I want to add a bit more from the alternate readings that are in the Lesson Handout. In Numbers, some of the Spirit given to Moses was taken from him and given to a large number of others -- maybe 72 in all, maybe more -- such numbers as forty and seventy can just mean "a lot" in Hebrew. Moses had asked the Lord to relieve him of some of the burden of prophetic leadership and as a result, the Lord took some of the Spirit away from Moses. The implication here is that prophecy is, or can be, a burden.

I pondered this awhile, and came to the conclusion that a definition of "prophecy" was needed. In our time, people usually think of it as fortune-telling, that is, revelation about the future, about things to come. But historically, the Hebrew Prophets were people who were charged with receiving God's messages and delivering them to the people. Since the people, when the messages were bad news, couldn't get to God, they got to the Prophets instead, and often the results weren't pretty. I can well understand, in this definition, why being a Prophet was a burden, especially since the Prophets mostly delivered bad news. So Moses got some help by not getting all the messages -- you might say that God put up a message filter for Moses that forwarded many of them to the others who now shared the burden of prophecy.

Then Moses did something that very few religious leaders have ever done -- he said that he wanted all of the people of Israel to be prophets -- that is, he wanted to give up all of the Spirit in him and spread it to all of the Israelites. How many people in positions of power have ever willingly given up that power, that unique place in their life and culture? I think Moses towers over most of humanity in this regard... accompanied, in our tradition, by Elijah and Jesus.
The Scriptures make clear that being gifted with the Spirit is not all sweetness and light -- often, a visitation by the Spirit means starting on a long, complex, and sometimes painful journey.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul says that no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit. I think this needs a little unpacking. We know that Paul had mystical experiences of the risen Christ, and then proclaimed "Jesus is Lord" everywhere he went. I think what Paul meant is that there is a difference between saying something and knowing it, between mere speech and deep belief and understanding. Paul's mystical experiences of the risen Lord changed him utterly, and then he began to say that Jesus is Lord -- and he really knew it. That looks like the Spirit at work to me.

In John 7, on the last day of the Feast -- the feast of Sukkot or Tabernacles, which is a harvest festival celebrating the goodness of the Lord in nature's bounty -- Jesus says that he and those who believe in him will provide "rivers of living water." Then John explains that this will happen by the Spirit. But then John says something strange -- he says that the Spirit is "not yet," that the Spirit will not come until after Jesus is glorified - - that is, until after Jesus is dead and resurrected. So where is the Spirit, the Spirit that moved in creation, that worked through the Prophets? On vacation? Somewhere else? Locked up?

Jews in Jesus’ time believed that prophecy died or vanished after the last of the great prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures; that the Lord had withdrawn the Spirit from Israel. So the many New Testament references to Jesus as a "prophet" were significant statements to the Jews -- how could there now be a Prophet in Israel? Where and when were the events announcing such a momentous arrival? I now think I understand why Matthew and Luke needed to create their birth narratives -- their stories supplied the missing announcement of the time and place of the return of the Spirit to Israel.

Further, the Jewish idea that the Spirit had been withdrawn from the world marks the peculiar view the Jews had (and have) as to their special standing with God. It is beyond their thinking that if the Spirit is not with them, that the Spirit could be with anybody else. Of course, being "special" often makes people arrogant and stubborn, and they demand special treatment and status -- many politicians come immediately to mind right at the moment. I think that these dangers are sometimes why the Spirit appears -- to warn the "special" ones that they are abusing their positions.

Then, in John 20, we see the culmination of what John promised in chapter 7 -- the bestowing of the Holy Spirit on the Disciples by the risen Lord, and the subsequent headlong rush of Christian history, driven by the power of the Spirit.

What does the word "Spirit" mean to you? If you're at all like me, when someone asks you a question, you go into a panicked test-taking mode -- you know, the "deer-in-the-headlights" response -- and you try to think of the right answer even though you're
having a brain freeze. Hmmm….. Relax -- this isn't a test and there is no right answer. But there most likely is an answer of some kind. I'm quite sure everyone has some ideas or feelings about what Spirit means, about what or who Spirit is.

Maybe it's kind of spooky, like "ghost;" or maybe it's energetic and lively, as in "spirited." Maybe it conjures up images of people of great spiritual presence and power. Maybe the images are closer to home, or maybe the feelings are difficult to think about, much less talk about.

Some fundamentalist Christians believe that prophecy was again withdrawn after the early days of Christianity, but to me that would mean that the Spirit is retired or on permanent vacation, and I don't believe that for one minute. I think it's safe to say that Spirit, however you think or feel about it, is central to our lives -- both in the world and in our faith. In fact, I believe that every one of us has come to our faith by the mysterious action of the Spirit working in us over days and years. I cannot explain how my faith has come to be; but I do know that sometimes I've been pushed, and sometimes led by the nose to my current condition, and that the mysterious force I call The Spirit is behind it all.

Often, the Spirit is embodied in people who push or pull me along. My dear friend Peggy Hays asked me to lead a discussion group at St. Mark's in Little Rock, and a new trajectory opened in my life in the church -- and in my life in faith, too. I'm a fairly solitary person, but most often, I feel the result of the Spirit's energy when I'm in community or in conversation or in some other contact with people. It seems that I need interactions with other people in order for the Spirit to work in me.

Recently, my cousin Gretchen, who lives in Coos Bay, sent me an email with a link to something she thought was amazing. Now, Gretchen sends me things several times a year, and they are sometimes politically conservative diatribes, sometimes amusing, sometimes not. So I approached this email with a bit of apprehension. The link took me to Glen Beck's website and I almost decided to stop. I'm glad I didn't. Beck had a link to a website with a presentation by a young musician named Eric Whitacre. The ironic thing is the second website is run by an organization called TED, which hosts conferences and presentations about a wide range of ideas and experiences, ones often on the liberal or progressive side of the spectrum -- not exactly Beck's home turf.

The young musician, Eric Whitacre, inspired by a YouTube video sent to him by a stranger, had the idea of getting some people -- other strangers -- together online to make music. He wrote a piece of choral music and made an internet video of himself conducting the score, and attached the accompaniment, the score, and the words, with the idea that anyone who cared to could sing one of the parts of the score while watching him conduct, while also recording the audio and the video of themselves singing as a web video. Eric then edited the returned videos into a single production, with the result that the individual singers were electronically joined together into a
massive virtual choir, 185 voices strong, with people from 12 countries. And the wonderful thing is that the way he and his team put the piece together resulted in the videos that the singers made of themselves appear as though they are standing in place in a choir.

Encouraged by the results, Eric decided to set a world record for such things, and using another score he had written, he again invited participation. This time the result included over 2,000 voices, with their videos of themselves displayed on turning spheres while the music plays. This is something wonderful -- people being alone, yet being together in a creative process that transcends every boundary imaginable. To my mind, nothing better exemplifies the creative power of the Spirit to push us into new territories of thought and action and community.

Many of us consider our cell phones and computers to be instruments of the Devil, not gifts of the Spirit; even I, as a technologist, sometimes want to put a slug through the machine and send it back dead from whence it came. But this amazing video has given me a new appreciation for the power of technology to bring us together in new ways, as a worldwide community, and that indeed is a great gift of the Spirit. Here's the link:


I view the Scriptures as being the stories of a long journey, and it is clear to me that all of us, all of humanity, are on a journey instigated and led by the Spirit. Jesus and the Prophets have said that the journey, though long and arduous, has a wonderful destination.

Does it matter to you how long the journey is?

Where do you think the journey is taking you?

Much of our ongoing human discourse amounts to questions along the lines of "Where are we going?" and "When are going to stop for lunch?" and "Are we there yet?" That essentially is what the Israelites were asking Moses in the desert, and he couldn't answer them, because he didn't know either. That frustration of not knowing was definitely a burden, and it still is. But the Israelites had manna and water from the rock to sustain them. Now, we have the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

Amen.