

The Call of the Wild Goose
Acts 2:1-21
Pentecost Sunday
May 27, 2007
Second Baptist Church, Memphis
Dr. Brent Beasley

As many of you know, my grandmother, my dad's mother, died on May 15. Interestingly enough, my grandfather, her husband, died in 1999—also on May 15.

The funeral for my grandmother was at Cedar Creek Lake United Methodist Church, which is in a rural area about a hundred miles east of Dallas, Texas.

My dad's parents had been charter members of their church there at Cedar Creek Lake going back about thirty years ago after they moved out there from Dallas after he retired from work.

My grandfather was the volunteer music director for about twenty years there. He was actually the one to organize their choir—get it started. And he was the director until just a couple of years before he died in 1999. It was and is a small church, about 100 or so people in attendance today.

As I thought about my sermon for today, I remembered that back in 1999 after my grandfather died, the next Sunday was, like today, Pentecost Sunday—the day when we celebrate and remember the coming of the Holy Spirit in wind and fire that's told about in Acts 2.

And I remembered on that Pentecost Sunday in 1999 telling about my grandfather's funeral. At his funeral, there was the Cedar Creek Lake United Methodist Church Choir in the choir loft of their brand new sanctuary.

We sang a congregational hymn, *Victory in Jesus*, then the choir sang *When the Roll is Called Up Yonder*. They sang a kind of a fancy arrangement of that hymn that my grandfather had taught them years ago, and it was one of their favorites.

The choir director had the choir stand to sing. She got them going, then she walked over to the side of the platform and picked up a music stand with a gold light clipped on the top and set it down in front of the choir.

It had a rose resting where the music would be. And the director walked away from the music stand and stood to sing with the choir. So, as the choir sang *When the Roll is Called Up Yonder* there was a music stand before the choir but no director.

What a great tribute to my grandfather.

And in my Pentecost sermon then eight years ago, I said, *And what a way to say, "He's not here, but he's really here."*

What I was trying to communicate in that sermon was the idea of the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives even after Jesus has ascended into heaven. The continuing presence of comfort. The continuing presence of peace. The Holy Spirit that is so often represented by a dove—a symbol of peace and tranquility.

What I want to talk about today, though, is not the Holy Spirit as a dove. Today I want to talk about the Holy Spirit as a wild goose. And that's very different.

What happened was this. If you look at Acts 2, you'll see Jesus' followers have been waiting in Jerusalem, and they finally get what they were waiting for. But it was more than they ever expected. And surely different.

Now, I don't know what to make of all this. I'm just telling you what I've been told. A loud sound came from heaven, like the rush of a mighty wind. Storms kicked up, winds blew through with thunder claps and a sudden downpour.

But at Pentecost it wasn't rain that came down but fire. Tongues of fire. Divided tongues, we're told. Not forked tongues, because that would suggest deception instead of truth. But divided tongues, probably hinting at the way the different languages of the world keep us from understanding one another.

And then the Holy Spirit filled each of them, and they began speaking in languages they didn't even know, as the Spirit gave them the ability. I could have used some of that for some Hebrew tests I took in seminary. In fact, instead of studying several times, I just prayed, *Lord, send the old-time power, the Pentecostal power.* It didn't work.

When Luke talks about other languages or tongues here in verse 4, he's not talking about incoherent speech. Now there is some of that talked about in the church at Corinth in 1 Corinthians.

But what this is talking about here, very clearly, is the ability of all these people gathered there from all over that part of the world being able to speak and to understand other languages that they didn't know before. It's as though the story of the tower of Babel has been reversed.

The Holy Spirit came. And the Holy Spirit came as a wild goose.

I have read and studied a little about Celtic Christianity, which is the name for that unique brand of Christianity found in Ireland. Part of Irish Christianity's uniqueness and vitality came from its geographical isolation. Celtic Christianity is full of life, loving God's creation and the natural world, and highly adventurous.

The Celtic monks were very different from Roman Catholic monks. They lived in conspicuous poverty, while Roman monks lived well.

The Celtic monks often chose their places of prayer in the remotest places in nature. They stood in the middle of the storm and prayed. They wanted to pray, and at the same time hear the roaring of the waves.

Perhaps you have heard one of their famous prayers of blessing: May the road rise up and welcome thee, May the wind always be upon thy back, May the sun always warm thy face, And may the rain fall softly on thy fields.

These same Celtic Christians chose the wild goose as a symbol to represent the Holy Spirit. It sounds strange to us—the wild

goose as a symbol for the Holy Spirit—, but it has a long tradition in Ireland.

Now the Roman Church imagined the Holy Spirit in the form of a peaceful, graceful dove. When you hear of the Spirit descending like a heavenly dove on you, you hear harps and strings softly playing and get a peaceful, easy feeling.

So, on the one hand, you have the image of a dove descending on you in peace. And that is a part of what the Holy Spirit is about.

But what I want to talk about today is the image of a wild goose descending upon you, which is a different matter altogether. When a wild goose descends on you, it's not all peace and tranquility. A wild goose is a big, noisy, bothersome bird.

I know a little about geese having lived for five years in the self-proclaimed "Goose Hunting Capital of the World," Eagle Lake, Texas. Not the goose hunting capital of the county or the state or the nation. The Goose Hunting Capital of the World.

Eagle Lake is a small town west of Houston, and it is rice country. Acres and acres of rice fields. And in the winter, millions of geese come from Canada and spend their winters on those rice fields. People come from all over the country to hunt these geese.

During the winter months, you might be driving along a two lane highway next to a rice field and see thousands of geese circling in the sky. Every evening and morning, you would hear the loud honking of millions of geese as they left or

returned home for the night. It was so loud you could easily hear it inside your house.

The image and sound of wild geese flying and honking is a pretty good picture of what happened when the Holy Spirit descended at Pentecost.

I like this image of the Holy Spirit as a wild goose because it jars us out of our complacency. The image of the Holy Spirit as a dove has become so familiar and domesticated an image that I think we really don't pay that much attention to it. It doesn't have a lot of impact.

I think we need this wild goose image to give some balance to our overly safe and overly sweet image of the Spirit. I heard one preacher ask, *How many times can you sing 'There's a Sweet, Sweet Spirit in This Place' without your blood sugar reaching diabetes levels?*

When the Holy Spirit comes in the Bible, it never seems to be sweet or safe. God's Spirit called the prophets to speak to Israel in words that were bold and sometimes dangerous.

Ezekiel saw a vision of God's Spirit blowing through a valley of dry bones and bringing them to life.

John the Baptist dressed in camel's hair and eating wild locusts proclaimed, *I baptize you with water but he who comes after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*

Paul gave this advice to young Timothy, *For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a*

spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline (2 Timothy 1:6-7).

Neither safe nor tame, this wild goose of a Holy Spirit inspired Paul to proclaim these dangerous words, *There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.* (Galatians 3:28).

It was this wild Goose that Jesus referred to when he preached his first sermon and quoted Isaiah, saying, *For the Spirit of the Lord is upon me for he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of God's favor* (Luke 4:18)

And just look at the radical nature of the coming of the Spirit in our text for today. At Pentecost, the disciples experienced the Spirit as *a sound like the rush of a violent wind and divided tongues as of fire.* Nothing safe and sweet about this coming of the Spirit.

From the first pages of the Bible to the last, the tone of the Holy Spirit is often more like that of a Wild Goose than like that of a calm dove. The Spirit is wild, noisy, unpredictable, and maybe even dangerous.

A wild goose is unpredictable, loud, even a little scary. I've heard of people using a goose like a guard dog. Have you ever had a goose chase you around—nudging you, nipping at you? Have you ever thought of the Holy Spirit as a pesky, annoying, wild goose?

It sweeps into our lives and into our congregations unexpectedly and sometimes even uninvited. It causes us to change course. It nudges and challenges and cajoles us to change the way we see things, do things, even believe things. It forces us out of our routines, our ruts, our ways we've always been.

It dares us to step out in faith, embrace new dreams, boldly go where only God's vision has gone before. It dares us to become the person and the church we are called to be, instead of the person and the place we've always been.

This image of the Holy Spirit doesn't drift quietly into our life and alight gently on our shoulder. It bursts into our life with power and noise and releases within us a faith and fire we never knew existed.

And that is both terrifying, and exhilarating all at the same time. Who knows when the Holy Spirit will burst in? Who knows where it might lead?

And are we ready, at all, to hear the call of the Wild Goose?

The great philosopher Soren Kierkegaard is well known for writing parables. He wrote two different parables, in fact, about geese. And I just want to tell you his two parables. The first parable is about wild geese. The second parable is about tame geese.

A wild goose left its flock flying in formation in search of food. This goose was weak and starved. By happy providence it found a barnyard filled with good food. It ate until it was full and slept.

When it awoke it was alone, no fellow birds in sight. Then he heard the sound of geese honking above. The sound stirred his spirit, but the comfort and plenty of the barnyard kept him there.

The next day he heard the birds in flight, the stirring was there inside but fainter. And again he resisted the calling of his spirit and stayed.

One day the birds flew by in their familiar "V" formation honking their call in flight. And the wild goose felt nothing.

I wonder if we have become so comfortable that we don't hear the call of the wild goose. Have we been so comfortable for so long that we feel nothing?

There is still that Pentecostal call of the Wild Goose. Can you hear it? Do you feel the stirring within?

So Kierkegaard's first goose parable is about wild geese. The other parable Kierkegaard wrote is entitled *The Tame Geese*. In this story he asks us to imagine that these geese could talk and think and do the kinds of things that we do.

The tame geese went to church every week. Each week they were inspired by a powerful, motivating sermon by the high goose. The sermon always went the same. The high goose would tell the assembled geese of their high calling and destiny and about what a high goal the Creator had appointed for geese, for he had given them wings.

As he said all this, the geese would honk and squawk their approval. The geese curtsied and the ganders bowed their heads in honor of the great words.

With their wings, the high goose told them, they could fly anywhere they wanted around the world. They were most pleased to hear this.

And each week after church, as they dispersed, the geese would *waddle* home.

I pray that we will hear the calling, feel the stirring, and rise up with wings to follow where the wild and Holy Spirit of God calls us and leads us.

**Thanks to Dr. Mickey Anders for the idea of the Celtic symbol of the wild goose for the Holy Spirit in a sermon preached at First Christian Church, Pikeville, Kentucky, May 19, 2002.*