

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
To be delivered on June 8, 2014	On the occasion of Pentecost

Chasing the Goose

When was the last time you did something dangerous?

The disciples were all together, presumably in the upper room in which they were staying, when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them. John describes the disciples as being behind locked doors for fear. They had reason to be afraid. Their Lord had just been put to death as a reviled criminal. As his followers, they may have been next. Fear can be a crippling power, preventing us from doing even what we know in our hearts to be the right thing. Fear holds us back.

Of course, fear is a reasonable response to danger. We have an almost instinctive fear of the unknown, the questionable, the dark and mysterious. This instinct serves us well in terms of our survival. Add to our innate sense of fight-or-flight, the lessons we have learned over a lifetime, our own experiences of things going badly, and we can become quite timid. We tend to be creatures of habit. We like things to be predictable. We enjoy repetition. We like to eat at the same restaurants. We like to vacation at the same place year after year. We all have our daily and weekly habits, and we don't like it when our routine is disrupted.

But every once in a while we get forced out of our routine; we get stretched beyond our comfort. Every once in a while something happens that forces us to step outside of fear, and to trust. It may be by no choice of our own. It may simply be the circumstances of our life. But every once in a while, we find ourselves on an adventure.

That's what happened on that Day of Pentecost when the disciples heard the sound like a great rush of wind, and saw the tongues of fire. They were sent on an adventure. Quite by

surprise, they found themselves acting against fear, going out of their room, speaking boldly to anyone who would listen about the miracle of Jesus' resurrection, and the promise of new life in Christ. They had a new spirit, a spirit of courage and confidence, a spirit of faith and fearlessness. It was not that they forgot what might happen to them. It had been less than two months since they watched Jesus die on the cross. They understood in the depths of their being what the consequences of this proclamation might be, but they greeted their new adventure with passion.

The spirit they inherited was the same spirit that rested on their Lord. It was the same spirit which anointed him at his baptism that was poured out upon his followers on Pentecost. That spirit descended from heaven and landed on Jesus as a dove just as he came out of the waters of the Jordan. In Mark's version of the story, the spirit then immediately *drove* Jesus out into the wilderness. I have this humorous image in my mind of this crazy dove chasing Jesus, flapping its wings and pecking at him, driving him into the wilderness. That was the beginning of Jesus' adventure, the one that ended with him hanging on a cross. I'm sure all of that was on their minds when the disciples began their mission in the streets of Jerusalem that Pentecost. In fact, there was no way they could have known for sure, but most of them would end their lives violently too. Still, the spirit drove them on.

The dove is a wonderful, biblical, symbol of the Holy Spirit. There is another one you may not be as familiar with: the wild goose. The wild goose, as a symbol for the Holy Spirit, has been attributed to the ancient Celts, and the religious community of Iona, on the small island of the same name off the western coast of Scotland, has chosen it as their symbol, which represents their commitment to Celtic Christian spirituality and to be led by God's Spirit in their journey to serve Christ. I like the wild goose as a symbol for the Holy Spirit because it fits better with my

own experience of the spirit. The dove is generally thought of as a calm, tame animal. That's why magicians use them in their acts. A dove will sit quietly in a pocket or up a sleeve until the trick is performed. The wild goose, on the other hand, is wild, unpredictable, free to fly over long distances. It can also be aggressive, noisy, belligerent. My wife, Sian, used to have two geese as pets. They were named Chuck and Marge, after her aunt and uncle. Let me tell you, you didn't come close to either one of them. Chuck would come after you, hissing, with his head down low, neck outstretched, and wings fluffed up. He was mean. If you got too close, you were going to get bitten. He chased Sian across the yard many times. And if you think it's funny to get bitten by a goose, then you've never been bitten by one. It hurts! And Chuck was a *tame* goose. He and Marge lived on their front porch.

That's why I like the image of the wild goose as a symbol for the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit can be dangerous. The Holy Spirit is wild and free. It is unpredictable. Jesus said, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (John 3:8) Those who are born of the Spirit do wild and dangerous things, like preaching Jesus in Jerusalem fifty-three days after his crucifixion.

The Spirit moves in us, through us, all around us. It is constantly, mysteriously, working out God's purposes. We are the willing instruments of the Spirit to bring about God's will, to build up God's kingdom. All too often though we are held back by fear. When the Spirit calls us to action, it will most likely be intimidating, something that we don't feel we are up to. Fear can prevent us from following where the Spirit leads.

Perhaps the Holy Spirit has been active in your life. Perhaps the Spirit has called you to do something, something either big or small. Perhaps you have felt that fear working on you,

counteracting the Spirit's call. Today we are reminded that in the Spirit, all things are possible. Today we witness how the Spirit pushed the disciples to that tipping point from focusing on Jesus' crucifixion to focusing on his resurrection, and the new possibilities it brought to light. Today we are encouraged by the wild and free Spirit of God among us, to follow where he leads, to face down our fears with faith in his goodness and power.

When the wild goose takes to wing, there's no telling where it might lead you. It will probably be dangerous. Will you follow?

Amen.