

Cooing or Honking

Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Viki Brooks
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church
July 26, 2026

Scripture Texts:

Genesis 11:1-9

Acts 2:1-4

The gift of the Holy Spirit equips us with the voice that speaks informed by faith

What a wonderful, fulfilling, interesting time I have had in serving this church for almost six years. I have been witness to your practice of hospitality, from greeters to hosts, as well as some of your skilled moments of negotiation across difference. I have felt accepted here in ways few congregations have done. I now understand the special place that this church holds in the hearts of several of my colleagues, Rick Spalding being one of the most ardent of your advocates.

Perhaps my favorite session meeting of each year is the one where we explore the theme for the upcoming summer. Session engages each other around some of the most volatile and unnerving issues of the day. Topics of healing and community seemed the most imperative in these conversations. While much of our exchanges use few words we would consider specifically theological, they are, nonetheless, lively and faithful.

The discussion of this year's topic, "Living Faith, Finding a Voice in Troubled Times", was one of the most engaging of these conversations. It was near and dear to my current struggle with what I need to say and/or live given what often feels like utter helplessness in these times.

It was not until we added the Living Faith as a part of our title that I could settle into this theme. You see, I think finding A voice in these days is not difficult. There are lots of voices. LOUD voices. Outrageous voices. We hear the voices on the internet, the television and in print media. The voices reverberate in my head at odd hours of the night. Amid the cacophony of voices, I am more intent on hearing the voices grown and nurtured by faith traditions.

I have never been one of those Presbyterians who shy away from talking about the Holy Spirit. As a denomination we tend to prefer the other two persons of the Trinity but I know in my practice of ministry, I rely on the voice, presence and stirring of the Holy Spirit. But when the troubles of our time involve wars and corruptions, when our constitution is being strained at best, when power seems to run roughshod over whole segments of the population, it can be difficult to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit.

In the text from Genesis, we hear about a decision on the part of God to confuse the people of Earth. God determined that the unity of the people of Shalimar was causing an illusion that they were all-powerful. An illusion that God needed to change. The tower was as high as the heavens

and God created people for the earth. So God meddled. God stirred the pot of their illusions and scattered people all over the face of the earth. The people ran from the structures they built. God caused them to leave their homes, their towers and their smug superior knowledge about getting things done. God created chaos and the result was the development of different customs and cultures and even languages. The people of the earth ceased engaging in cooperative works. They could not understand others in their midst who spoke with different intonations and syll-a-bles and different understanding of how to go about a joint task. Nationalities and identities were divided.

And then, in the book of Acts, our biblical account of the beginning of the church, God sent another chaotic event. The people were gathered for a celebration of the gift of the Torah, or law, to the people of Judah. This observation takes place near the 50th day after the Jewish Passover. It is called Pentecost. Pentecost simply means 50. God sends a rush of wind, tongues of fire and a cacophony of voices in many different languages. But this time, all the gathered could understand the languages uttered in loud exclamations. As a result of the gift of the Holy Spirit, which was included in the chaos, those gathered understood the many languages spoken through the wind. Rather than divide, this chaos brought the people together. This windy, fiery event called Pentecost is a special day and one we often acknowledge as the birthday of the Christian church.

Stories such as these, sacred to our understanding as people of God, act as handholds in our journey of faith. We twist and turn them like a kaleidoscope seeing various combinations of color and possibility that deepen our faith as the shifts of light make new images and form new understanding. These two stories offer two very different outcomes but otherwise there are many similarities: there is confusion, the understanding of languages is altered, and, as a result, the people respond to each other differently.

The key element in the story from Acts is the gift of the Holy Spirit. This gift creates understanding amid chaos. The outcome is not assimilation of a monolithic set of expectations, laws or practice of conformity. The spirit opens the people to a new understanding, a new way of being, if you will.

The Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, is many things in the scriptural context. It is the ethereal descending dove lighting over Jesus at his baptism. It is the light of insight spoken to Mary at the conception of Jesus. It is gentle teacher in Paul as he writes his letters to the many cities of Judea. We understand the spirit on gently flapping wings or in unaccustomed light or in the inner voices that bend us to understanding. But the spirit is also the force that knocks Saul to the ground amidst his travels to persecute the followers of Jesus. It is the also the unseen force that drives the devil from some of the street dwellers of Judah. And, it is the chaotic wind that announced a new understanding of God's voice in our midst.

Kinda contradictory, wouldn't you say?

It is by the empowerment of the holy spirit that people of faith speak God's way into the world. But is the Holy Spirit more wild than wispy? Is it gentle light or dancing flame? How do we, journeying in this year and this place, recognize when the words we hear, or speak, are those empowered by the spirit or simply vibrations on our eardrums?

One of the founders of the Iona Community, George MacLeod, explored the concept of the Holy Spirit as a wild goose. He was inspired by the Celtic drawings of the Holy Spirit that resembled an aggressive goose. This image captured my interest and felt a bit more true to my experience of the Holy Spirit than a gently cooing dove. Anytime I have felt the certain push of the Holy Spirit, it felt less ordered than my daily existence and far from peaceful. I associate the soft grey sounds of doves in my neighborhood with a gentle awakening to the day. The brittle iridescent sounds of the wild geese that often cross over our property while following the Mohawk River sound more like harsh warnings or urgent alerts. Doves can be trained, geese, well, good luck with that. Doves will quickly flee our prey-prone dog. I suspect a goose would deal with his barking with wings spread wide and honks that would drown out his barks turned to a whine as he fled the creature to the safety of the house!

Whether dove or goose, whether gentle or insistent, animation by the Holy Spirit has some common qualities that can inform how we hear or speak the presence of God in the actions or words of another.

First, the presence of the Holy Spirit always, always, comes from the place of love. At times that place is a gentle affirmation of a healing direction or a quiet hand when all seems lost. At times that love is the squawking aggressive insistence that demands to be heard or points out the errors of our bad behavior when we follow the crowd or deny the goodness in people we may not understand. The Holy Spirit moves us to embody God's good will in all that we do.

Second, the Holy Spirit speaks with wisdom. Not a wisdom detached from experience, not the content orientation of quoting scholars, but with the perspective that grows from the nurture of God. The value of wisdom is not measured in assets but by the evidence of the spiritual truths that the word contains. Wisdom draws upon experiences of faith and goodness making conclusions from what is upbuilding rather than demeaning.

Third, the Holy Spirit speaks with fortitude. This is not the brawn of physical prowess, it is not faith in what is large and impressive but rather the steady word that is distilled from listening to others and searching what is present for what is best for all involved. It is the certainty of many that good can and will be done. It is the humble consideration, born of strength, that we might get some things wrong.

Fourth, the Holy Spirit speaks with a sense of wonder and awe for God. This is not blustering bombast born power. This is the sort of childlike surprise that comes from unveiling the marvels

of magnetic energy or absorbing how plants make food from sunlight. It is an innate sense that there is a source of greater intelligence in the world that moves us to revere what might be possible if we are still and let God be God.

From my examples and turns of phrase, I am sure my undertone of politics is not particularly veiled. You see, I don't think we can speak to the troubles of our time without first grounding ourselves in prayer and a relationship to the Holy Spirit. Nor can we speak to our times without addressing things we consider political. Things like gender equity, fair treatment of immigrants, respect for human life as well as feeding the poor and tending the sick. These are all things best done with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, sometimes in the form of a quiet cooing and sometimes with loud alarms of honking. With the eyes and heart of faith, these are actions animated by the Holy Spirit. If we walk with the Holy Spirit, if we believe that God acts in and with us, politics are part of the equation.

Don't get me wrong: This is not saying that the processes of politics or political parties themselves has any preeminent godly access to the Holy Spirit. Engaging with human processes involves politics. We are political beings. Sometimes that involves a gentle letter writing campaign advocating for funding for the hungry and others it involves protests against governmental actions or people. Coos and honks, if you will. All have the possibility of being fruits of the Holy Spirit as measured by the four evaluative tools I have suggested: Is it loving, is it wise, is it strong and does it stir a sense of awe in a power greater than ourselves?

The Presbyterian Church has always been a participant in the civic arena. It is part of why I joined this denomination. Over the last decade or two we have withdrawn from this work to a large extent. At this year's National Assembly, which concluded at the beginning of July, our denominational leaders considered many aspects of local, national and global concerns. The most moving paragraph to this child of the 60's was a comment on a proposed statement on the problems with Christian Nationalism. In more than one area, the writers of this proposal, pointed toward a resurgence of what they called civic theology. I heard this comment as our denominational willingness to reenter the civic area with our specifically theological perspective on the world's problems. It is my prayer that we will recognize the animation of the Holy Spirit in their comments and advice in this document and in those that are forthcoming. It is also my prayer that the newly revived practice will continue throughout the decade. As such, I find hope that church, as we know it, will also find a renewal be it with coos or honks.

MAY IT BE SO.