



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the last days, God declares, "I will pour my spirit out on all flesh." In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

"Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore." These are famous words, though often misquoted. I had to look them up. In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy says them right after a mighty wind falls from heaven and carries her far from home. The tornado takes her over the rainbow and into the Land of Oz. There she confronts the Wicked Witch and her followers. She overcomes various challenges on her journey to the Emerald City. All the while, she is looking for her way home.

It is a compelling story in part because Dorothy is on a mission. The unity of the drama comes from her desire to go home and how she overcomes the challenges she meets along the way. Dorothy does not shut down or submit to her fears. Rather, she nourishes a steadfast hope, and she continues to follow the road. *The Wizard of Oz* is a story, of course, but it is also far more. It is an allegory for the human condition. Like most classic stories, we find something new every time we go back. It's not just nostalgia that compels us to watch it year after year. It used to be on TV every single year. In the film, we find ourselves.

In the story, Dorothy's whole life has changed. She has to respond to new and disorienting circumstances. She meets and befriends others along the way. She overcomes obstacles that come up, but she can't look back. Things will never be the same. Although the books came out much earlier, the version of the story we know best comes from the Great Depression. The movie came out in 1939, 11 years after this church was founded, on the brink of the Second World War, but it has a message for our own age of division, violence, and despair.

Understandably, some of us may try to look to the past for guidance, but the truth is there never was a golden age. The world has always been made up of human beings like us. We are all that God has. We make poor, sometimes disastrous choices. We hurt each other, and we need to repent. As often as not, we disagree with one another, and we have to seek God's will together. The process is messy. It involves working with other frail and compromised people with whom God has called us to live in community.

One thing is certain, for followers of Jesus, there is no perfect past. There is only God's call here and now to love and serve our neighbors. This calling defines our

mission in the world. As we pursue this mission together, we make both faithful and unfaithful decisions. At our best, we do the next right thing. In the midst of the clanging and confused voices that vie for our attention, we must learn to listen for the Spirit of God. We must learn to follow in the steps of Jesus. We must rely more fully on His love, for that is what it means to live as Christians today.

Wind and fire. Powerful, elemental, dangerous. That's how the Spirit is described in scripture. The living God is not for the faint of heart. According to the letter to the Hebrews, it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God, for our God is a consuming fire. And yet, like the burning bush, we are set on fire, but not consumed. The Spirit of the living God burns away all that is rotting and dying in our lives. She is like a periodic forest fire. She clears out the brush and the undergrowth, even some of the trees, but the forest itself is made stronger and more healthy by her flames. In the Spirit, we die to our false selves. We come to share in the freedom of Jesus. We discover who we belong to. We find out who we really are. We are adopted as God's own beloved children, and we are given power to pursue God's calling for our lives.

Along the way, our plans get disrupted, they often do, and our priorities change. As we respond to God's call, we no longer belong to ourselves alone. Instead, we belong to Jesus, who lived and died and rose again. We belong to Him. His Spirit is powerful. Like the wind, she blows wherever she wants to. She can drive us this way and that. She will carry us places we didn't expect to go, but she always carries us. She always carries us deeper into Jesus. She carries us deeper and deeper into His love. In the Spirit, we become characters in a plot of someone else's devising. We find ourselves in a strange new world, a world in full and living color, where all the landmarks have changed. Much that we took for granted is gone, but at the same time, everything is new and vibrant and alive.

Unlike the Land of Oz, this world is no mere fantasy. This tired old world that our hands have made is transformed by the love and goodness of God. The new world we inhabit is God's own world. It is the real world, the only world there is. But this world, and every last one of us, has been changed. When the Spirit falls, the freedom and joy of Easter become the meaning and purpose of our lives. Our lives become a testimony to the resurrection of Jesus, and so we can no longer be complacent or satisfied. No longer can we accept a world in which people go hungry or homeless. No longer can we accept a world in which people are excluded, ignored, or mistreated.

We refuse to live by violence and fear, for the Kingdom of God is here, and the Kingdom of God has become our true home. The Spirit of Jesus burns inside our hearts. We have left the house of bondage for the house of freedom, and so nothing else will do. In the words of the old gospel song: “We have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back.”

Picture the scene. The disciples are huddled away in the upper room, waiting for the promise of the Holy Spirit, and then – and then the Spirit falls on them. Peter gets up to speak. He connects what is happening with the words of the prophet Joel, "In the last days, God declares, I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters, all your children shall prophesy." With a powerful wind and tongues of fire, the crowds witness this very outpouring, and then the apostles testify in many different languages about the mighty works of God.

They tell us about the liberating power of Jesus. They speak about the presence of the kingdom. They tell how He healed the sick, cast out demons, and even raised the dead. They speak about His kindness to sinners, to all those deemed outsiders or unclean. They tell about His suffering and torture and His death on the cross. They tell us about His empty tomb and the joy of meeting Him alive. God confirms the truth of their testimony by the gift of the Holy Spirit, by God's own Spirit of love falling with power from Heaven.

The Spirit falls on every imaginable kind of human flesh, Jewish flesh and Gentile flesh. Flesh that has been enslaved, all ages and genders, every race and language, every tribe and nation, poor and suffering flesh, naked, shivering, starving flesh, flesh that sleeps in our streets, flesh that is in prison or behind barbed wire, immigrant flesh and the flesh of war-torn refugees, queer flesh, wounded flesh that's known trauma and violence and exclusion. Veterans, those missing in action, those who are prisoners of war. All of this flesh and more besides, all of it is taken up into the flesh of Jesus to be healed and transformed there, to be loved and accepted there just as we are, for we are being changed into His likeness day by day, into the very likeness of Jesus.

Baptism is a powerful sign of God's wild and prodigal love for all of us. According to the letter of the Ephesians, God's love transcends our human divisions. The blood of Jesus breaks down every wall that divides us. Listen to the witness of William Stringfellow, a lay member of the Episcopal Church and one of our best theologians. Among other things, he practiced street law among the poor in East Harlem, and he said the following about holy baptism. "Baptism is the sacrament of the extraordinary unity among humanity wrought by God in overcoming the power and reign of death, in overcoming all that alienates, segregates, divides, and destroys us, in our relationships with each other, within our own persons, and in our relationships with the rest of creation. Thus," he goes on to say, "the vocation of the baptized person is a simple thing. It is to live day by day, whatever the day brings, in this extraordinary unity, in this reconciliation with all people and all things, in this knowledge that death has no more power." Death has no more power.

What does this new life look like? What does it look like to live this way? In baptism, God calls us to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors

as ourselves. God calls us to strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being, because God has created each and every one of us, and in Christ, God has set us free. God's love shows no partiality. In God's kingdom, “every” really does mean every. “All” really does mean all.

And so young and old, rich and poor, saints and sinners, people from all backgrounds, long-established church members and more recent arrivals, people of every faith and persuasion, all of us have become God's beloved in and through Jesus. In the power of His Spirit, we become His agents and ambassadors in the world. We are called to serve others in His name wherever we find ourselves, in our neighborhoods, in our workplaces, in our churches, in our schools. We are sent out in the power of His own breath to continue His mission of love.

And so we feed the hungry, we clothe the naked, we welcome the stranger, house the homeless. We defend those who have no other helper. We pass on the forgiveness that we have received, for none of us has any right to be here except by the grace and invitation of Jesus. He is the only host for this gathering. He is the sole proprietor of this establishment, and we are His beloved guests. There is one body and one Spirit. There is one hope in God's call to us, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.

Amen.