I want to begin today by sharing a story that has become legend in the annuals of the Bridgewater Church of the Brethren. Though I have heard the story numerous times, it happened before my time here, and so I share it with you via a first-hand account written by Katie Scarvey, a daughter of this congregation who wrote about the experience in the Salisbury Post on December 29, 2002. In her words:

On Christmas Eve, I went to a service at the Bridgewater (Va.) Church of the Brethren with my parents and my brother and his wife. I enjoy seeing old friends when I get the chance to go there, which is not often.

We picked up our candles at the door and found our seats. As other worshippers came filing in, we scanned the order of worship, amused that the church had printed an informational paragraph about the candlelight part of the service. It included practical instructions on how to light the candles -- the person with the lit candle should leave it upright; the candle being lit should be tilted into the lit candle. Participants were also admonished not to get the lit candle near clothing or hair.

We had a few laughs over the thought that people would need to be advised to keep a flame away from their hair or clothing. None of us had ever seen a warning like this before. We chalked it up to our litigious society, which has prompted manufacturers to put some rather obvious warnings on products, including one on a Rowenta iron that reads: "Do not iron clothes on body." Or one for a sleep aid that warns, "May cause drowsiness."

After we all had our candles lit, we sang "Silent Night" a cappella. As always, I felt a sense of peace and serenity pass over me as we all sang in the dark together, faces glowing in the candlelight. It was a beautiful experience. But before I could give myself over fully to the moment, someone across the aisle let out a piercing scream. All was not calm. We kind of peered across the center aisle to see what was going on, but we couldn't see much. After a few seconds, the screaming stopped. A person in our vicinity whispered that someone's hair had been on fire.

In a real testament to the politeness of this congregation, the music did not stop -- although we did slow down a bit and threaten to peter out for a few bars. I was dangerously close to creating a scene myself. After the initial shock wore off, on the last verse I got the giggles, which then turned into stomach-heaving laughter. By sheer force of will, I managed to get my composure back together after a few seconds. After a few seconds, the screaming stopped. A person in our vicinity whispered that someone's hair had been on fire.

On the way out, no one was talking about anything else. "Kind of spoiled the mood, didn't it?" I asked. I was thinking that my girls would be so upset that they were still in Connecticut and had missed all the drama. "I thought maybe someone was speaking in tongues," my brother said. You would have to know the rather sophisticated
personality of this church, which includes faculty members of Bridgewater College and James Madison University, to know how funny that notion was.

Before we left the sanctuary we learned from those who had been on the other side of the aisle that, indeed, someone’s hair had caught on fire. “I guess that’s the last time that we’ll light candles on Christmas Eve,” said my mom, somewhat sadly.¹

I am happy to say that we still light candles here on Christmas Eve. And since that eventful night in 2002, I don’t believe any hair follicles have been threatened during any of our worship gatherings. But this story has been told and retold and is now the stuff of legend. It was a defining moment in the life of our congregation.

Many years ago, another community of faith was gathered together in one place for worship, when they too experienced a defining moment. Like us on Christmas Eve, they had come together to observe one of their “High Holy” days – the Jewish Festival of Pentecost. And also like that legendary Christmas Eve among us, things didn’t go as anticipated in their gathering. I don’t know whether they would have agreed that the events “spoiled the mood,” but things certainly got shaken up a bit, and gave the people something to talk about. And though all indications point to no hair having actually been burned in their gathering, there were reports of fire-like “tongues” coming over each them. If that wasn’t enough, they did speak in tongues.

Today is Pentecost Sunday, the day on which we celebrate and remember this particular defining moment in our faith tradition. As such, we recognize the gift of the Holy Spirit, and we remember the beginnings of what we now call the Church. This was not the first, nor the last time that the Spirit had moved in dramatic and unexpected ways. As we saw in the scripture Eric read from Numbers, the Spirit had been known among the Israelites to have come upon a gathered body before, empowering the people to speak with newly prophetic voices. That too, had been a defining moment in the history of a people…an experience that proved worthy of chronicling, a legend among the people of Israel.

But there was a significant difference in the movement of the Spirit among the wandering Israelites in the desert on that occasion and the manifestation of the Spirit that evidenced itself in the rushing wind, fiery tongues, and linguistic diversification of Pentecost. Because like the legendary “Silent Night, Hair’s Alight” Christmas Eve extravaganza at BWCOB in 2002, the Spirit-powered prophesy of the Israelite elders who had been gathered by Moses at God’s suggestion was a one-time event. Those seventy elders, who suddenly began to speak with a power that was not their own, had never done so before, nor would they do so again. It was a once and done occurrence; a momentary movement of God’s Spirit. Like the hair singed at the Bridgewater Church of the Brethren in 2002, the prophesy of the elders of Israel had impressed itself upon the lasting memory of the community. But while the memory lingered, the presence of the Spirit that had originated it did not.

Not so with the events in that early gathering of the left-behind followers of Jesus who had come to be together in Jerusalem at Pentecost. Though the singular and extraordinary events that had created such a ruckus did not continue in force for those that experienced them, the Holy Presence which had moved among them in that gathering did not abandon them. In fact, it became the motivating and unifying force for a spiritual movement that very quickly went global. It became the lasting heart and soul of the Christian church, the animating center of the faithful who accepted the mantle of continuing and expanding the mission and ministry of Jesus.

Much can be said, and in fact has been said, about the Holy Spirit on and of Pentecost. Sermons have been preached and books have been written. Movements and communities have been founded upon interpretations and experiences of the nature and power of the Holy Spirit. Ecclesial wars have been fought for centuries over the semantics of the who, what, when, and how of the Spirit in relation to the doctrine of the Trinity. But through it all, there is a constant – the Spirit does continue to move and act and manifest itself in the lives and communities of the followers of Jesus.

We forget this all too easily. We quickly become complacent and apathetic in the day-to-day living of our lives. We take for granted the communities of faith that exist and gather in continuity with those borne out of the Spirit’s movement at Pentecost. We become blind and numb to the more subtle stirrings of the Spirit’s movement among us, and suspicious of the more dramatic manifestations that evidence themselves in charismatic and Pentecostal communions around the world and the lives of some of our more “radical” friends. But if we remember our roots, and pay attention to the signs among us, we will see evidence of that continuing holy presence with us.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in a published sermon entitled “The Gospel of the Holy Spirit” helps us to imagine where we might see this divine presence by suggesting some ways she believes the Holy Spirit still acts today.

I quote her at length:

*One famous way is to give people a sense of new beginning. Say you have been in a bad mood for the last year. It seems as if all you are doing is moving bricks from one pile to another – at work, at home, in your sleep – just moving bricks until you don’t care whether it is day or night. Then one of those nights while you are lying awake in your bed, you hear one bird sing outside – just one. Why is that bird singing in the middle of the night? you wonder, and then you realize it is not the middle of the night anymore. It is the edge of morning. The bird chirps again and something inside of you softens. You take a deep breath for the first time in months and your chest opens up. You get a second wind. You can call this anything you want. I call it an act of the Holy Spirit.*

*Another trademark of the Holy Spirit is to give people a way back into relationship. Maybe this has happened to you. You are estranged from someone you really care about – because of something you said or did or something the other person said or did – it really does not matter which. The point is, you are tired of it, so you start plotting ways to get*

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You draft letters, rehearse phone calls, only none of them sounds right. You are still hanging on to your hurt, or your anger, and it keeps leaking through. Then one day for no apparent reason something inside of you says, “Now.” You grab the phone, the person says, “Hello?” and the rest is history. Your heart opens and the right words come out. A reunion gets underway. You can call that anything you want. I call it an act of the Holy Spirit.

These intimate encounters are so potent that it is easy to stop with them, but the truth is that the Holy Spirit can work with hundreds of people at the same time. I have seen it happen over and over again in large rooms full of people who have come together to make decisions or seek direction. One by one, they come into the room with their own agendas. Some of them come fearfully, ready to defend themselves. Then someone says a prayer, people begin to talk, and for no apparent reason positions begin to shift. People listen to each other and take each other seriously. They become creative together, coming up with ideas none of them had thought of on their own. It is as if a fresh wind blows through the room and clears everyone’s heads. You can call that anything you want. I call it an act of the Holy Spirit.

Once you get the hang of it, the evidence is easier and easier to spot. Whenever two plus two does not equal four but five — whenever you find yourself speaking with eloquence you know you do not have, or offering forgiveness you had not meant to offer — whenever you find yourself taking risks that you thought you did not have the courage to take or reaching out to someone you had intended to walk away from — you can be pretty sure that you are learning about the gospel of the Holy Spirit. And more than that, you are taking part in it…

I suspect that when and if we take the time to look for such evidence, we too will spot the sure signs of the Holy Spirit moving among us still:

They might appear around the family dinner table, or in a seemingly casual conversation with a friend with whom we speak every day.

They might appear in a hospital bed as a loved one is dying, or in the words of a heartfelt letter or card.
They might appear in the grief and sadness felt in sympathy for strangers in another part of the world, or in an unexpected gesture of love and kindness from someone to whom we are lending aid.

They might appear slowly in the deliberate process of a community counting the cost of standing up for truth and justice, or suddenly in a public school hallway when a usually timid student finds the strength to stand up for a bullied classmate.

They might appear with dramatic effect in a moment of conversion or repentance, or so subtly they can only be traced in retrospect and recognized as a still, small voice that nudged us toward wholeness.

Whenever we witness such evidence, we catch a glimpse of the divine. Wherever we perceive such signs, we can be sure the Holy Spirit is at work among us still. And in that instant when we recognize that presence, we create another defining moment in the story of Pentecost.
Some of us will call these “God moments.” Today, I say, “That's the Spirit!” – that holy, mysterious, divine presence continuing to move among us, within us, and through us.

May it to dwell with us…
to comfort us and to challenge us;
to grant us courage and to give us peace;
to draw us near to one another
and to send us out for our neighbor’s good.

May it be so.

Amen.

**Sending Prayer** ~Erin Matteson

Holy Spirit-
You who blow about us,
both gently, and in ways that annoy us,
continue to breathe new life into us.
Continue to guide, or even push us
to that which will make us,
and your world, whole.
We can handle getting our hair messed up
or our feathers ruffled by your winds,
if we know it will be for a good cause.
With each breath we take,
fill us ever so much more
with your love and all things good,
that we might be a part of helping another
breathe more easily, more calmly,
more in rhythm, with you.
In the name of Jesus,
whose every breath offered hope and peace,
Amen.

**Benediction**

May we go in the comfort and peace,
the hope and the promise,
of the Spirit,
who continues to move among us,
within us,
and through us.

Amen.