

### OPENING PRAYER

Gracious and holy God, give us diligence to seek you, wisdom to perceive you, and patience to wait for you. Grant us, O God, a mind to meditate on you; eyes to behold you; ears to listen for your word; a heart to love you and a life to proclaim you; through the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, Amen. (Prayer for Those seeking deeper knowledge of God, *ELW*)

### FOCUS VERSE

(Matthew 3:7-12, Galatians 5:16-23, Acts 10:3-42)

### MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)* or copies of opening hymn

# *The gift of the Spirit: A divine wild goose chase*

## Session three

Wind of God, refining and rerouting

BY SARA OLSON-SMITH

### INTRODUCTION

This is the last session of our Bible Study on the Holy Spirit. The purpose of this study is to deepen our understanding of the Spirit's actions in scripture and in our lives. Within Celtic spirituality, one of the metaphors for the Spirit is a wild goose. This image reminds us of the freedom of the Spirit, and the way the Spirit moves in our lives and world with boldness and wildness. So, this study is like a wild goose chase, teaching us Spirit-sightings skills, but through the lens of the Bible, instead of a pair of binoculars.

I remember playing in the yard as a kid while my dad raked leaves. A flock of Canadian geese flew overhead, in their traditional v-formation. They were loud and beautiful. I had a lot of questions. I wanted to know where they were going and why. Mostly I wanted to know how they knew where to go. My dad, weary of the questions, simply answered, "they smell their way."

This answer seemed ridiculous and did not satisfy me. For decades I have been curious by migration. Not just the migratory patterns of Canadian geese but also butterflies who fly with those tiny wings hundreds of miles to their mating grounds in southwest Mexico. Or whales who navigate the globe to find food and warm waters to birth their babies. I eventually learned that even biologists are

not sure how animals know where to go for their migrations. Some think that it is, indeed, smell. Perhaps my dad really did know what he was talking about.

For this session, we'll look at the migratory patterns of the Spirit. Or, rather, how the Spirit moves and guides us. Geese have this internal knowledge of where to go as they fly. For us, as followers of Jesus, the Spirit can become our internal knowledge for the ways we live. Today's session will focus on how the Spirit shapes the way we act and the choices we make, refining and re-routing us.

#### **PNEUMA: GOD'S TRANSFORMING WIND**

In our previous session, we began with a simple Hebrew lesson. Today we turn to Biblical Greek, the language of the New Testament. In Greek, the word for spirit is "pneuma" (pronounced nooma). Like ruach (Spirit in Hebrew), pneuma means not just Spirit, but also wind and breath, as in pneumonia. Last session, we centered our learning on the Spirit as breath. This session, we'll track down those images of Spirit as wind.

#### **PNEUMA: A PLAYFUL WIND**

📖 **Read:** John 3: 1-10

#### **Share aloud or reflect:**

1. What is something that caught your attention or surprised you as you read this?

In this episode of John's gospel, the religious leader Nicodemus makes a stealthy visit to Jesus in the middle of the night. Nicodemus comes with curiosity, to figure Jesus out. But Jesus just gives him riddles. When I read this story, I picture Jesus and Nicodemus stuck in a hilariously confusing conversation like Abbott and Costello with their "Who's

on First?" comedy sketch. There is a sort of playfulness about it, as Jesus tries to describe the goodness of being born from above, into a new life in Jesus. All the while, Nicodemus is stuck trying to figure out how someone can take a repeat trip through the birth canal.

But they stick with each other. We can imagine them just laughing together, two wise and learned men of faith, discussing what new life in Jesus is really like. Then Jesus talks about the Spirit, as wind. Remember that these words are interchangeable here, so Jesus says, "the wind/Spirit blows where it chooses. . . so it is with anyone born of the Spirit/wind" (John 3:8). Jesus describes a freedom and joy that comes from being made new by the Spirit.

As Jesus says, we don't know where the wind comes from or where it is going. We can't even see the wind. But we can feel it. We can watch it bend trees toward the east or see the blossoms blow from an apple tree. The same is true for the Spirit, we can't see it, but we do see the people whose lives are led by the Spirit into unexpected adventures and new life.

Nicodemus' own story is a reminder of this. At the end of the gospel of John, Nicodemus was moved by the Spirit to boldly and generously by 100 pounds of spices to bury and care for the crucified body of Jesus. The Spirit moved in Nicodemus to find new life in following the crucified Jesus. We can never be sure just how the wind of the Spirit will blow.

This story reminds me of the playful qualities of wind. Wind makes kites dance in the air and spins a pinwheel. The Spirit moves us in playful ways, too. The Spirit can remind us to take delight in this life and to not take ourselves too seriously.

#### **Share aloud or reflect:**

2. Think about wind. How does it work,

where is it creative or destructive, how is it powerful or gentle, how is it playful? How might this be similar to the Holy Spirit?

3. Talk about a time when you were led or moved to act in ways that were surprising or unexpected? Could this have been the Holy Spirit? The Wind of God?

#### **PNEUMA: WIND THAT REFINES**

📖 **Read:** Matthew 3:7-12

#### **Share aloud or reflect:**

4. How do you feel as you hear these words of John the Baptist? What is stirred up in you?

John the Baptist preaches in the wilderness about repentance, about turning away from the old ways, in an act of metanoia. Then he speaks of the power One who is to come, who will baptize with water and the Spirit. He speaks of a threshing floor that clears the chaff from the wheat in an unquenchable fire.

We often read this as a judgment on people who are either chaff, or wheat. Good people and bad people. But the truth is that each of us is made up of both good and bad, chaff and wheat. But through the love of Jesus, we can live our own lives letting go of the chaff, turning away from the harmful ways, repenting of our sinfulness. This is the refining work of the Spirit.

When a metal or other substance is refined, the impurities and unwanted stuff are removed so that the most true, most pure, most authentic thing is left. The Spirit works in our lives to shape us into our most pure selves. I mean this not in terms of “purity” – some kind of pietistic, unblemished perfection. Instead, the Spirit works in our lives to

refine us into our most authentic selves.

John the Baptist talks about how Jesus will come to baptize us with water and with Spirit (wind). This brings to mind the geological wonders at Arches National Park in Utah. Those sandstone rock formations have these beautiful colorful layers of compressed rock, with stunning and unique arches, shaped over time. The power of the wind and the current of water eroded the rocks to become what they are.

This is how we can be refined by the Spirit. Like the arches of Utah, we have been baptized by water and wind. We can allow the love of Jesus move in our lives to shape us into lives that reflect our authenticity. The Wind and water can erode our sharp edges, those actions and thoughts that hurt us and others. In this, the Spirit refines us into our truest, most faithful selves.

#### **Share aloud or reflect:**

5. What are some experiences that have refined you, eroded the sharp edges, and helped form you into your most authentic self?

#### **PNEUMA: WIND THAT REFINES OUR FRUITFULNESS**

📖 **Read:** Galatians 5:16-23

In these words to the Galatians, Paul contrasts Spirit and flesh against one another. Unfortunately, these words have been misused to shame bodies and disconnect us from creation. But for Paul, the way of the flesh isn't about bodies, but encompasses all that brings separation, captivity, and death. On the other hand, the way of the Spirit is that which brings connection, freedom, and life.

“Live by the Spirit,” Paul writes. He goes on to point to the destructive stuff that keeps us from really living. These are the behaviors that pull us out of

relationship with others and with God. By contrast, the fruits of the Spirit are the things that restore relationships and create life, joy, and community.

We have the choice to live with the Spirit or in opposition to it, to let the wind be at our back or to ride against it. One place I most feel the power of wind is when I ride my bicycle. When I ride into a strong headwind, I work hard but barely get anywhere, and start to question everything. But when I have the wind at my back, I feel strong and powerful, like I could ride forever. When we live by the Spirit, we have the tailwind to push us operate with those fruits of the Spirit, and the power to do the hard stuff of being in relationships and living in community.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

6. Look at the list of the “works of the flesh.” How do those things pull us apart and keep us from being in authentic relationship with others or ourselves? Now look at the fruits of the Spirit. How do those things pull us into deeper, more authentic relationships with others and ourselves?

**PNEUMA: WIND THAT RE-ROUTES**

Many of us have abandoned atlases and have become dependent on our phones or other GPS devices to get us where we need to go. They tell us exactly when to turn and how long it will take us to get there. But many times, I am smarter than my phone, so I go my own way. The GPS tells says, “re-routing” and takes some time to calculate the new way to get me where I need to go.

The Spirit guides our lives, regularly re-routing us, though not like a GPS. There is no exact path that God lays out for us at our birth. God doesn’t plan out our lives with the precision of exact turns, or jobs, or addresses, or relationships (and especial-

ly not designated stops for suffering). God’s great desire is that we love God, love ourselves, love our neighbors and love this world. God longs for us to use the gifts we’ve been given to serve a greater purpose, to find meaning and joy. But when we get off course, the Spirit does re-route us, moving us toward the things that bring us into deeper love of God and away from the stuff that harms us.

**PNEUMA: WIND THAT RE-ROUTES OUR LIVES**

📖 **Read:** Acts 9:10-19 (or the full story, Acts 9:1-22)

**Share aloud or reflect:**

7. Perhaps you’ve heard Paul’s story, but what did you learn about Ananias?

Many of us know the story of Paul’s conversion. He starts out with threats and murder against the first followers of Jesus. Then on the road to Damascus, a light flashed, blinding him as he hears the voice of Jesus call him. But Paul’s experience is only half of the story. There would be no St. Paul the Apostle without the courageous trust of a man named Ananias.

Jesus came to Ananias in a vision and told him to go to Paul (though he was called Saul) and to lay hands on him. Despite his very rational protests, the Lord convinces Ananias to go to see the man who persecuted him and his community. When he enters the room, Ananias goes right to Saul/Paul, touches his head, and says, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus has sent me here.” Ananias calls him brother, no longer a threat or enemy. And through Ananias’ prayers, Paul receives the Holy Spirit, sees again, and is baptized.

The Spirit moved Ananias from the route of justified fear and anger to reconciliation and renewal. By the Spirit’s power, he could see Paul as a sibling, as someone God could choose to be an instrument.


The Spirit utterly re-routed Paul's life, but Ananias had his own conversion, to see the expanse of God's call, grace, and community.

The Spirit moves us, too, beyond our narrow thinking to see the breadth of God's love. It is easy to get stuck in the ruts of long-held resentments and anger that poisons us. But the Spirit seeks to free us from those things and everything that keeps us from freedom in our hearts, liberated relationships, and reconciled communities. When Ananias said "brother Saul" that day so long ago, he set our church on a road of forgiveness, truth-telling, and reconciliation. And those times when we are driving in circles of anger, fear, and hatred the Spirit reroutes us into this way of life.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

8. When has your heart or mind changed about another person? How did this re-route your life?

**PNEUMA: WIND THAT RE-ROUTES THE CHURCH**

 **Read:** Acts 10: 25-34, 44-48  
(or the full story, 10:1-48)

**Share aloud or reflect:**

9. Perhaps you've heard Peter's story, but what did you notice about Cornelius?

Cornelius holds the honor of being the first Gentile to be converted, baptized, and gifted with Holy Spirit. His story tells not only of his own steady faithfulness to listen to God's call to him, but also of the community's willingness to accept and affirm him. There was great debate within the early Christian community about who belonged.

In the beginning, most people, including Peter, believed that if a Gentile (a non-Jewish person)

wanted to be baptized, they must first fully enter the Jewish community of practice and belief – which for men meant circumcision. But the Lord thought otherwise, and gave Peter a vision about clean and unclean animals. He gave Cornelius a vision, too, of God receiving his prayers.

The Spirit brought them into the same room, and everyone waited to see what Peter would say to Cornelius. Would he be welcomed or shunned? With eager longing Cornelius said, "So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say." To which Peter responded with some of the most powerful words of scripture, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation every one who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God."

While Peter preached, the Holy Spirit did something extraordinary. The Holy Spirit fell on, embraced, the Gentiles who were with Cornelius. In wonder and joy, the circumcised believers were astonished that the Holy Spirit had been poured out, "even on the Gentiles."

Later, when he is questioned about this, Peter said, "If God gave to them the same gift (the Spirit) that God gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to hinder God" (Acts 10:17). Cornelius was the first of many the Spirit chose to break open the Church. The Spirit embraced those Gentiles, re-routing the early church to begin this great mission of sharing the good news, drawing people into faith, and welcoming in all kinds of people into the community of faith. The Spirit is poured out, even on us.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

10. Where do you see the Spirit re-routing or moving your congregation into deeper love of God or neighbor? Where is there support? Where is there resistance? How do you know it is Spirit-led?

## CONCLUSION: THE SPIRIT WHO DWELLS IN US

📖 **Read:** Romans 8:14-28, 38-39  
(Or the whole chapter, if you can)

### Share aloud or reflect:

11. What words of hope or comfort did you experience in these words from Paul?

One last thing about geese. They don't fly alone. Their V-formation gives them the communal strength to face strong winds, giving them both endurance and speed. The lead bird is in complete service to the rest, as they cast off of her, giving them so much more range. But they take turns in that spot, sharing the burden, and flying together.

I am ending this Bible study with Romans 8 as a blessing to you. Paul writes poetically about the ways the Spirit doesn't just accompanies us, but dwells within us. The Spirit will give us strength and power to endure hard things and to hold onto hope when things are uncertain. The Spirit will birth new things in us and through us.

Throughout this study we've seen how the Spirit makes us new. The Spirit is a Reviver moving us from despair to hope, and from death to life. The Spirit is the Reformer, bringing us from oppression to justice, and from exclusion to hospitality. The Spirit is the Refiner bringing us out of falsehood into authentic selves, and from evil into goodness. And the Spirit is the Re-router moving us from paths of hate to acts of love, from prejudice to affirmation.

But these movements are not always easy. They are like new births that might come with labor pains. But these beautiful words from Paul promise that the Spirit is with us through these new births, like a midwife. The Spirit stays with us through every moment of the struggle and the joy, never

leaving us to bear it alone. The Spirit hears our groans and intercedes with sighs to deep for words. The Spirit gives us hope and courage.

The Spirit does this by dwelling within us and pulling us into community. Just as geese don't fly alone, we don't live faith alone. We are held together by the love of God. And, as we hear in those powerful words that end Romans 8, we can trust nothing in all creation can separate us from that love we know in Jesus. Perhaps we aren't on a Divine Wild Goose chase at all. Perhaps the Holy Spirit is chasing us, embracing us in that love which will never let us go.

### Share aloud or reflect:

12. As we conclude this study, what is one thing that you will take away that has inspired you?

## PRAY TOGETHER.

Begin your prayer with a simple Breath Prayer. (Explain it, and then give space for silence)

~~Inhale. Fill your whole body and heart with breath.~~

~~Feel air in your lungs.~~

Say: *Holy Spirit, refine me.*

Exhale slowly and fully.

Say: *Holy Spirit, guide me.*

Simply repeat, with ten good breaths in and out, with the words.

Pray with one another. (Ask if there are particular prayer concerns for the people in your circle, voice those prayer requests and longings in your prayer together.) 🌿

# *The gift of the Spirit: A divine wild goose chase*

## Session three

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BY SARA OLSON-SMITH

### OVERVIEW

In this third session, we will dive into scripture that speaks of the Spirit as the wind of God. We'll look to scripture stories that speak of the ways the Spirit refines us, moving us to repentance and right action in order to live as our most authentic selves. Turning to stories of the Spirit's work in the early church, we'll look at the ways the Spirit continues to reroute God's people into ever more faithful ways of being. The study concludes with the words of Romans 8, reminding us of the Spirit's presence dwelling within us, bringing new things to birth in us.

### SESSION GOALS

- Understand the Spirit as wind that is powerful, playful, and liberating
- Recognize the ways the Spirit is refining us to become our most authentic selves and the ways we are still in need of repentance and renewal
- Identify the Spirit's continual work to move individuals and the church in ways of affirmation, reconciliation, and deeper faithfulness
- Find hope in the promise of the Spirit dwelling in us

### A DISCERNMENT EXERCISE

People often come to me, as their pastor, to talk about a big decision. They outline the various options, articulate the dilemmas, and talk through

their thinking. But then they say, "OK. Now tell me what to do." With a very few exceptions, I don't. I ask questions that can help them think through the best way forward.

At some point, most of us find ourselves asking questions about where the Spirit is guiding us and how we are being led. Perhaps it is around choices put before us or about roads diverging in the woods of our lives. Maybe it's deeper questions, like the one Mary Oliver poses at the end of her brilliant poem "Summer Day":

*Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?*

You or your Bible study group can use the framework of this Bible study on the Holy Spirit as a tool for discernment. After tracking the Spirit through scripture, we've learned many of the telltale signs of the Spirit's presence. We've become Spirit trackers! Like bird watchers, we've come to understand the calls, footprints and migratory patterns of the Spirit. We've learned where to look for the Spirit and how to tell if the Spirit has come near. We can use these signs to track the Spirit in our own lives.

Here is a discernment exercise to use as you conclude this third session or at another time, with your group or on your own:

- What is a decision you are wrestling with? What is something close to your heart, about which you are asking: "Is this Spirit-led? Is it the next best thing for me?" Write your response. If you are comfortable, share your response aloud.
- Ponder the following questions. Say or write a simple yes or no, then reflect on the answer.
  - **Reveal:** Would this decision make space/create opportunities for me to show Jesus' love?
  - **Resource:** Do I have the gifts for it? Does it bring me energy?

- **Revive:** Does it bring life, not just for me but for others, especially those closest to me?
- **Reform:** Does it draw me into closer relationship with God and others?
- **Refine:** Will this decision help me to freely be my full, truest self?
- **Reroute:** Is it risky or a bit of a challenge—not just the safe or easy route?
- If many of your responses are “yes,” this choice will probably be consistent with who you are and who the Spirit is calling you to be. Lots of “nos” would demonstrate that this choice will likely not be life-giving or authentic for you. But let your prayerful responses be a way to listen to the Spirit’s guidance.
- Remember that the Spirit leads us, but not with exact directions. The key is to listen and watch and pay attention to your own body, heart and mind. Be open to the Spirit at work in your life—like the wind that empowers you and the breath that gives you life.

## NOTES FOR LEADERS

### 1. Take time for introductions.

Begin with brief introductions. Even if people know each other well, a simple question helps deepen our connections with each other. For this session, ask their name, and if they have ever had an experience of a powerful wind.

### 2. The Wheat and Chaff (what to use and what to throw into the fire, depending on time).

As I have written in the previous sessions, these studies are jam-packed with scripture readings, questions and reflections. There are a lot of Spirit-sightings in the Bible, and even with these full studies I missed many of those Spirit moments. Still, unless you set aside a lot of time for these studies, you will not be able to cover everything. So here are my suggestions of what to cut and what to keep, depending on how much time you have:

## SHORT STUDY (30 MINUTES)

1. Read or share the introduction and the paragraph about “pneuma”
2. Skip to read Matthew 3:7-12
3. Read and Discuss: “Wind that refines” and questions 4 and 5
4. Skip to read or share “Wind that reroutes”
5. Read Acts 9:10-19
6. Read and Discuss: “Wind that reroutes our lives” and questions 7 and 8
7. Read Romans 8:14-28, 38-39 and the conclusion
8. Pray together.

## A LITTLE LONGER (45-60 MINUTES)

Add Acts 10:25-34, and “Wind that reroutes the church” and questions #9-10.

## EVEN LONGER (60-90 MINUTES)

Add Galatians 5:16-23 and “Refining our fruitfulness” and question 6.

My hope is that even if you shorten the study, you can encourage your group to read through the parts you leave out, for their own reading and reflection. For questions not talked about as a group, or if you don’t have a circle of people with whom to study, read the scripture verses and reflect on the questions in your journal or in a quiet time of prayer.

## ENDING WELL

As you end, take some time to review what you talked about over the last months. What worked well? What was challenging? What things have stuck with people? Where are there still questions? Celebrate one another and your commitment to showing up for and with each other through these weeks of study. 🌿