

**"The Holy Spirit as a Wild Goose"**  
**Sermon for Baptism of the Lord**  
**Lectionary Year B**  
**January 8, 2012**  
**Text: Mark 1:4-11**  
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In 563 C.E. an Irish missionary named Columba sailed from Ireland and landed on a small island off the coast of Scotland named Iona. It is a tiny island, only three-and-half miles long and a mile-and-a-half wide, but from that place Scotland and England were evangelized. Iona brings to us the unique faith tradition of Celtic Christianity. It began in Ireland about a hundred years earlier when St. Patrick arrived there and accomplished a truly extraordinary spiritual awakening: the conversion of the whole country to Christianity. Irish Christianity flowered while at the same time the Dark Ages hit Europe, so it has been suggested that the spirituality of Ireland in that period helped significantly to save the Church.

Part of Irish Christianity's vitality came from its geographical isolation. This faith tradition was robust, creation-admiring, Christ-loving, and adventurous. During this early development of Irish culture and Irish Christianity, small universities sprang up everywhere, numbering three hundred by the end of the fifth century. Bards

traveled across the country singing their stories of Ireland—its glories, its wars, the beauty of its women, its history.

The art of manuscript illumination flowered, producing one of the great pieces of such work in all history, the Book of Kells, which Stephanie and I had the opportunity to see firsthand when we were in Dublin. The Iona Community has continued to prosper and among other things, has contributed a great deal of wonderful worship music, as Brian has mentioned, to the life of mainline churches. But perhaps the most unique aspect of what Celtic Christianity has offered to the Church is its symbol for the Holy Spirit: *the Wild Goose*.

We are not used to thinking of the Holy Spirit as a Wild Goose. We are more used to thinking of the Spirit as a gentle dove, descending on Jesus at his baptism, as described in our text for this morning from Mark's Gospel. A docile dove is a far cry from a wild goose. Yet if you read the New Testament closely, the latter is a far better description of the work of the Holy Spirit than is the former. It is clear in the book of Acts, for example, which ought to be referred to as the Acts of the Holy Spirit rather than the Acts of the Apostles, that the Spirit is hyper-active and highly unpredictable. Sometimes the Spirit says "yes," sometimes "no," and sometimes "not yet." The apostles themselves are often rather unready and ill-

equipped to comprehend and respond to what the Spirit is doing and where the Spirit is going. Therefore the image of the Holy Spirit as a Wild Goose is perfectly in line with biblical teaching.

So what does that mean for us? What does it mean for us to understand that the Holy Spirit legitimately can be seen as a Wild Goose? It means that *the Holy Spirit goes where it chooses*. That is what it means to be wild. It is not and will not be domesticated. The Holy Spirit as a Wild Goose always runs ahead of us, and we are just supposed to do our best to keep up with it. It is an exhausting chase, but it is worth it in the end. The way of the Spirit is the way of life—the way of health and growth—if we only will choose to follow it by letting it lead and guide us. We are to follow *its* agenda, not necessarily ours. That requires of us openness, flexibility, a willingness to adapt and change if necessary. The reason why God the Father often laughs at our plans is because the God the Holy Spirit may have something entirely different in mind for us.

Since the Holy Spirit as a Wild Goose goes where it will and does what it wants, that means *there is no controlling the Spirit*. The Spirit won't be captured and put in a cage. It won't be corralled. It won't be bound or confined so that it can be brought out only when the church feels it is acceptable to do so. The church can't just say, "We need a

revival; release the Kraken," and expect the Holy Spirit to go and do its thing. Attempts to control the Spirit, to subdue it or mute or silence it in any way, are futile and thus foolish at best and faithless at worst.

There is an old story among preachers about a man who wanders into a downtown church, one with lofty spires and equally lofty traditions. The worship service was a work of art each week, a choreographed performance with liturgy that matched the lectionary perfectly, beautiful music by Europe and England's finest composers of centuries past, and preaching that was eloquently prosaic and poetic. The ushers wore tuxedos and made sure to seat visitors only in the places where long-time members of the church did not choose to occupy. Such was the church the man wandered into.

As the preacher began reading from his well-prepared sermon manuscript, the visiting man was moved by the power of the words, and so he shouted out, "Amen!" A hush fell over the sanctuary, and the preacher hesitated a moment but continued. In a little while the visiting man responded to another of the insights into the biblical message the pastor was offering in his sermon and responded with another "Amen!" At this point one of the penguinesque ushers approached the man and told him that such outbursts were not considered appropriate in worship at that church. Yet once more, as

the orator was making his final alliterated point, the man could contain himself no longer, and so he stood up and shouted, "Amen! You tell 'em, Rev. Way to go! That's what we need to hear."

The largest of the ushers, the one who looked like he could have played linebacker in the NFL, told the visiting man, "I'm sorry, Sir, but I am going to have to ask you to leave. We simply cannot tolerate our worship service being disrupted in this way. I would be happy to escort you out." "But I can't help it. I've got the Spirit," replied the man. "Well, *you certainly didn't get it here,*" responded the usher, "And so you will need to come with me right now."

It's a funny story, but as it is with many such tales, it has a painful message: *every church does not welcome the Spirit, especially the Spirit understood as a Wild Goose.* The Holy Spirit always goes where it chooses and refuses to be controlled. That means just because churches have steeples or crosses or even crosses with flames attached—they aren't necessarily spiritual. That means the Holy Spirit may not have taken up residence there. That means perhaps they are churches not really led and guided by the Spirit of God. That means the Wild Goose may not be on the loose in that church.

Actually, it is pretty easy to tell when the Holy Spirit as a Wild Goose is *not* running where it will and doing what it will in a church. I

ran across this list the other day, presented in the style of Jeff Foxworthy, whose "You may be a redneck if . . ." lines have become legendary. It is a list of the kinds of churches where such a Holy Spirit is not likely to be leading and guiding the congregation to any great extent toward health and growth. That is why these kinds of churches are more likely to be sick and dying.

According to this list, your church may not be as spiritual as it thinks it is if it lives in the past, remembering what it used to have in the way of programs and what it used to do to bring in new members, but refusing to work to continue to do those things in the present and future. Your church may not be so spiritual if it makes only short-term decisions, playing it safe by choosing band-aid approaches, when it should demonstrate its faith in the providence of God by risking long-term solutions with lasting benefits. Your church may not be so spiritual if it resists making changes, clinging to the notion that, "We've never done it that way before." Your church may not be as spiritual as it thinks it is if far more of its members attend the congregation's social events than Bible studies or other opportunities for spiritual growth.

The list suggests that your church may not be so spiritual if it says "no" more than "yes" to new ideas for congregational health and

growth. Your church may not be so spiritual if it is miserly, upholding a mission statement to keep the church doors open for as long as possible while spending the least amount of money possible to do so. Your church may not be especially spiritual if it is only superficially welcoming of new members, not even getting to know their names for three or four years. Your church may not be as spiritual as it thinks it is if it is much more concerned about members who have left than those who have joined the congregation.

The list goes on to observe that your church may not be so spiritual if it won't tolerate preaching or teaching it doesn't agree with, no matter how biblical or relevant it may be. Your church may not be so spiritual if it insists that other congregations which truly have open hearts, open minds, and open doors are merely "niche" churches and outside the norm. Your church may not be all that spiritual if its members are always ready and eager to complain and be critical about what the church is *not* doing, but mostly reluctant to affirm and celebrate what the church *is* doing. Your church may not be as spiritual as it thinks it is if its members are quick to point out what someone in the church needs to do in order for the congregation to grow in terms of membership and prosper in terms of finances, as long as that someone is someone other than them.

The Holy Spirit *is* a Wild Goose. Celtic Christianity has it right, despite our subtle and not so subtle attempts to deny it. The ancient Iona Community still is trying to help us learn to be more submissive and less controlling when it comes to the activity of the Spirit. Just as it is easy to identify a church that is rather closed to the activity of the Spirit, it also is not hard to spot a church wherein the Holy Spirit is running around like a Wild Goose: It is healthy, growing, alive, vibrant, developing and maturing theologically, expanding missionally, being generous in its stewardship, and exhibiting unity in the midst of diversity.

The church with the Wild Goose on the loose has a positive attitude toward change, embracing it and not being threatened by the new and different. It is a truly caring community, displaying love and acknowledging the value and worth of everyone in the congregation, especially those who have come into the church recently. It relishes being challenged to think and act in ways it hasn't in the past, ways that can let the community around it see that the church is relevant and sensitive to the needs of the neighborhood. It is focused on the future and what this Wild Goose of a Holy Spirit can accomplish in and through it to meet the needs of its members, its community, and the world.

The question is this: Are we at Schreiber open enough to let loose this Wild Goose of a Holy Spirit run free in our midst? Are we open enough to trust that the Spirit is waiting to lead and guide us to become healthier as a congregation and to grow as a result? Are we open enough to allow this Wild Goose of a Holy Spirit to take us wherever it will—even if it is down a road that is far less comfortable, far less familiar, far less routine, far less secure, and far less in keeping with our own tightly held ideologies. Are we that open? Dare we be that adventurous? Make no mistake about it. Our future as a church depends on it. [This sermon was inspired and informed by the sermon preached by H. Stephen Shoemaker, "The Holy Spirit as a Wild Goose," on July 24, 1994 at Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas.]