

PENECOST – THE WIND OF GOD

(05/21/2024)

Scripture Lessons: Acts 2:1-4
John 3:1-10; 20:19-22

“Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”

(Jn.20:21-22)

*Who has seen the wind?
Neither I nor you:
But when the leaves hang trembling,
The wind is passing through.*

*Who has seen the wind?
Neither you nor I:
But when the trees bow down their heads,
The wind is passing by.*

This past week, as I was thinking about Pentecost, which we celebrate this morning, I was reminded of this poem that was written in the late 1800’s by the English poet Christina Rossetti. This morning, we are going to explore the symbolism, the experience of the Holy Spirit as wind or breath.

The word “Pentecost” is taken from the Greek word for “fiftieth.” Although we commonly think of it as the birthday of the Christian church, the moment when the disciples were baptized with the Holy Spirit or by the Holy Spirit, the event of their transformation from disciples into apostles, it has deep roots in the Hebrew religion. In the Old Testament the customary name for this observance is the Feast of Weeks. It is regarded as the second of three obligatory observances, and it always falls somewhere between Passover and Tabernacles. In Exodus 23:16 we read that the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost is “the feast of harvest, of the first fruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field.” This indicates that it was originally an agricultural festival, an occasion on which the community expressed gratitude to God for the first fruits or the early harvest.

In ancient Israel, this festival was to be observed seven weeks “from the time you first put the sickle to the standing grain.” The historian Josephus calculated the date of Pentecost as the fiftieth day after the first day of Passover. We as Christians date it as the fiftieth day after Easter, the resurrection of Jesus as the Christ. In New Testament times, neither Jews nor Christians were allowed to work on the day of Pentecost.

As we heard this morning, on the first Pentecost following Christ’s resurrection, which is the way it probably should be described, the disciples and others are gathered together in

Jerusalem. Luke, the author of Acts, reports that there was a sudden sound “like the rush of a mighty wind” from heaven, followed by “tongues of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them.” As a result of this experience, the disciples begin to speak in tongues, in languages that were understood by people from many nations. Peter interprets the event as a fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel, meaning that the “last days” have arrived, that Jesus has been raised from the dead, and he calls the group to repent. As a result of his preaching, on the day of Pentecost about three thousand persons are added to the group of believers.

As we heard this morning, two of the symbols of Pentecost, and thus of the Holy Spirit, are wind and fire. When I asked our Bible study group several years ago why the disciples might experience the Holy Spirit as wind, one of the participants suggested that God is like the wind because you can’t see the wind, just like you can’t see God. You are, however, able to feel the wind, just like you can feel God in your heart. Not bad, huh? Now you know why I like leading study groups and also where I get the material for my sermons!

In the Bible, God is often experienced as wind or is described as using the wind in some meaningful way. In the book of Genesis, we read:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind of God swept over the face of the waters (Genesis 1:1-2).

A wind of God swept over the face of the waters. A little later in Genesis, after the rains of the great flood ended, we read:

But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided (Genesis 8:1).

This is an interesting passage, since it implies that God had forgotten Noah and then suddenly, for some reason, remembers him. In any event, God uses the wind to restore the earth to a habitable condition after he has destroyed it.

As recorded in the Old Testament, God uses the wind to bring about his ends. When Moses is trying to convince Pharaoh to release the Israelites, God uses the east wind to bring the plague of locusts (Exodus 10:13). In the book of Jonah, the word of the Lord comes to Jonah telling him to call the inhabitants of Nineveh to repent for their wickedness. When Jonah attempts to flee from the task to which he has been called, the Lord causes a great wind to batter his ship. When Jonah confesses to the sailors that he has been attempting to flee from the presence of the Lord, he is thrown into the sea. As soon as he is thrown into the sea, the wind subsides (Jonah 1:1-17).

Scripture tells us that God is to be feared. It speaks not only God's love and forgiveness, but also God's judgment and punishment. Thus, the wind is not always experienced as a blessing; it can also be an expression of judgment or wrath.

In the account of the storm on the lake, Jesus shows his power over the wind, over this aspect of God's nature. When his disciples wake him from sleep, Jesus calms the wind that threatens to capsize their boat. The disciples are astonished that "even the wind and sea obey him" (Mark 4:41). This shows that Jesus has the power to influence God, perhaps even to be an important part of God's continuing evolution.

The pastoral letters of the New Testament refer to the wind as a force that can lead us astray, that can cause us to veer from our course. Paul tells us,

We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine (Ephesians 4:14).

In his letter to the early church, James writes:

If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind.

However, being blown about by the wind of God or by the winds of life is not always a bad thing. In our gospel lesson this morning, Jesus tells Nicodemus,

The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. This is how it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

Isn't this how we experience life? The winds of fate can bring us good fortune or dash our little ship upon the rocks. The winds of life can fill our sails and empower our spiritual journey, or it can leave us tossed about by every new fad that comes down the pike. The winds of change can lead us forward into new life or leave us spinning in a whirlwind of chaos.

In the New Testament, the Greek word that is commonly translated as wind, *pneuma*, can also be translated as spirit. God's Spirit is experienced like a wind. At times it is gentle, like a breath. In the words of one of our favorite hymns, we pray,

*Breathe on me, Breath of God,
Fill me with life anew,*

*That I may love what Thou dost love,
And do what Thou wouldst do.*

In his post-resurrection encounter with the disciples in the upper room, Jesus tells them,

Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you. When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

The breath of Jesus brings an experience of the new creation that he incarnates and that he calls us into, paralleling the original creation as described in the second creation story, where we read,
. . . then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being (Genesis 2:7).

It is in light of the rich historical symbolism of breath and spirit that we learn how on the day of Pentecost the disciples experience the presence of God as the sound of a mighty wind. They experience God as energy. Throughout the book of Acts, we do not find the followers of Jesus working out a theological doctrine of the Spirit. Rather, the Spirit *works upon them*, transforming their minds, their hearts, and their lives. I think this is an important distinction. It is a distinction that has not been embraced by the institutional church through the last two millennia.

The Spirit of God is the vital energy of God. It is the creative and vitalizing force of creation, the source of human thought, feeling, creativity, and wisdom. It is the Spirit of God that calls us into being, calls us forth into life, enriches our lives with what we call religious experiences, and inspires us. The early Christian community ascribed this energy to the Spirit of the risen Christ. The power of this Spirit vitalizes and energizes the disciples. It empowers them to become apostles, carrying the good news of the gospel to the far corners of the earth and continuing the healing, reconciling work of their Lord.

Jesus says, “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. This is how it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Isn't this true of our little church? Those of us who are a part of this church, who have made a commitment to this little community of faith, know that there is a special spirit in this church. Speaking for myself, this church is like no other than I have ever served! It is not a big church; it is not a rich church; it is not even what most people would consider a successful church. Yet it is a special church! This church is comprised of members who are not only people of faith; they are also people who are committed to grow in the faith, who seek to deepen their relationship with God through Christ. I believe this shows forth in everything we do. It helps to shape this somewhat motley collection of individuals into a very special community.

The words of our anthem this morning, which was written by our own Darlene Sanderson and Michael Larson, serve as an articulation of this theme:

*Wind is like the Spirit, the Holy Spirit,
The unseen Spirit that gives us life! . . .
It's invisible, a gentle breeze, . . .
We cannot see it, yet we feel it, . . .*

*It surrounds us and refreshes us
In a quiet and unseen way. . . .
It has no form; it has no shape,
But we feel its presence in our lives.*

I think this is true of our church, or at least my experience of our church!

As we celebrate Pentecost this morning, let us try to become aware of the places in our lives where we experience the wind of the Holy Spirit. It may be gentle, nothing more than a breath, but it may breathe new life into our souls. It may be the wind of change, calling us forth into new life, leading us down new paths. It may also be the gentle guiding force that brings our life's journey back on its proper course, a field of energy both within us and around us that brings us back on center when we are missing the mark in our life.

Let us also try to be open to where the wind of the Holy Spirit might be leading us as a church. Then let us feel its power, its vitalizing energy, that we, like the disciples, might become transformed through the presence of our risen Lord.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
May 12, 2024*

An audio version of this sermon will appear on our church website later this week.