

Water, Wind, Wonder

A Sermon from Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Susan Quinn Bryan, Pastor

May 27, 2007 – Pentecost Sunday

**Scripture Readings: Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:24-34;
Romans 8:14-17; John 14:8-17 (25-27)**

That rag-tag group of those who had been touched by the teachings of Jesus were among the throngs who had converged upon Jerusalem to celebrate the festival of Weeks, or Shavuot, or Pentecost which was a time of thanksgiving and dedication of the first fruits for those agrarian peoples.

In the reading from Acts, I substituted the modern names of those places where Jews had already settled, scattered to the ends of the earth as they knew it long before the diaspora. Yet they were still Jews, who came to Jerusalem to celebrate this thanksgiving for the first fruits.

That was why they were all together in one place . . .

Some of these folks who just a short while ago had lost their teacher, Jesus,

. . . and it must be said that he didn't die in his bed . . . he was killed by the government as a political criminal. That must be said because it frightened his followers, and they scattered in fear of their own lives.

He wasn't the first to die like that, not the first religious leader who tried to bring reform to Judaism.

Many of those teachers had found an audience among a people in crisis. Many had found a following. And many had found themselves a threat to the occupying forces, and been put to death, along with their followers (often along with a number of innocent people.)

Terror works for occupying armies.

Jesus' teachings did not fade away, however.

Jesus' passion continued to live in the hearts and minds of those who followed him. For them, his words had given life and that life simply would not die on a cross. They continued to experience his presence with them.

Resurrection. There was still life even after death.

It is something his followers still have a hard time explaining. He was still among them. It wasn't the same in many ways. But he was present with them all the same.

So, there they were, still grief-stricken to be sure, fearful, and yet, and yet . . . the rumors must have flown about as they were gathered in small groups with those who spoke their own language.

(We tend to do that . . . gather with those who speak our language. Hang with those we can understand and who understand us. It's easier. More comfortable.)

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They may have been all together in one place physically, but they were separated by language and experience and so many other things . . .

But these stories wanted telling beyond the comfort zone. These stories pointed to connections beyond language barriers and differences.

One can also imagine those stories of his teachings, and his healings, and his continued presence being translated from one language to another . . . some catching snippets and understanding only enough to want to know more . . .

So the room was filled with the chatter of many tongues . . .

perhaps reflecting on his death, on the rumors of his continued presence with them, or even those who told of his promise to send the Spirit among them.

This movement of Jesus never tolerated divisions . . . from the beginning it was about breaking down walls and seeing connections . . .

and as the stories spread, as the ‘ah-has’ moved through that room . . . how does one describe what happens when a movement really begins? We would talk about the electricity in a room . . . something that had not even been discovered in that day.

“There came a sound like the rush of a violent wind. . .” according to the writer of Acts.

Pause

(I’ve heard mighty winds in my life, having lived both on the coast and also in ‘tornado alley.’ I know what mighty winds can do.

I’ve seen what things can look like after a mighty wind has blown through: the devastation, the broken limbs, the chaos. The leveling. The walls torn down.) Pause again.

That’s what happens when the Spirit comes with full force into our lives.

It turns things over. It messes up our life and our plans and rearranges things. It disorients and reorients. The Spirit blows and one’s life is reordered. One’s values change. One’s priorities change.

Slave owners become abolitionists. Abusers become advocates. Tables are turned. The world is turned upside down.

Metaphor abounds: divided tongues as of fire rested on each and they were filled with the Holy Spirit and the most obvious division-- language – disappeared. They could understand one another’s tongue.

The wind had blown down barriers and familiar territory was no longer recognizable. “All were amazed and perplexed. They said to one another: “What does this mean?”

The answer, the only answer that made sense:

They are drunk.

They seem to have forgotten what Jesus said about the inability to put new wine in old wineskins. The old wineskins split and cannot contain the new wine.

This little group was not drunk on new wine.

They *were the new wine*.

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They were changed and filled with a passion that would take this new way of being human far and wide.

If we keep reading Acts, we begin to see the passionate way in which their lives were lived out.

That kind of passion can change the world.

Pentecost is celebrated as the birth of the church.

It is the time at which those who followed Jesus took upon themselves Jesus' mission and committed themselves to spreading his love far and wide.

Michaela Bruzzese says this about this joyous celebration:

“It also introduced one of the most profound paradoxes of our lived faith: how to live as a church community, as we are called, and how to honor the individual manifestation of the Spirit within each person. The Spirit descended while the apostles "were all in one place together," in community. And yet it sought each person when it "parted and came to rest on each one of them" (Acts 2:1-3). Each one spoke a different tongue and bore a different gift to the outside world. How do we at once maintain our communal church without monopolizing, limiting, or otherwise hindering the gifts of the Spirit as they are expressed in each member?

Paul also rejects the temptation to make spiritual authority hierarchal and insists that no one is privileged by birthright: "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption, through which we cry, 'Abba, Father!'" (Romans 8:15). We are all born to this Abba who takes us in regardless of our birthright, race, gender, language, or social status. This Abba adopts us all joyfully and, with our consent, breathes the sacred Spirit upon each one of us, equally commissioning us to be agents of grace, mercy, and love in this world.”

Today, we welcome into this expression of the body of Christ, fifteen new members and five children. It is an exciting day for Mount Auburn, and for our new members, some who are to be baptized in just a few minutes.

We welcome each of these new members and Faye has already shared with you some of the gifts these folks bring to the body.

Pentecost is the gift of God's Spirit to the church, and it is a joy to celebrate it, but Pentecost is also a responsibility.

It is so easy to lose the power of the fire and wind – both things that can destroy as well as empower. How sad when the church and its members fall back into fear and develop a fortress mentality, or seek to hoard the gifts of the Spirit, or the love of God, as if God's love could ever be scarce.

When we set up walls to divide and gates that need careful tending, we deny the power of the Spirit.

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Without God's Spirit in our lives, in our church, we are dead, dry dust. God does not abandon us to our fear and trembling. God continues to blow through the church in new ways, breaking down those constructions of ours that would prevent anyone from being fully empowered to participate in the ministry of Jesus.

So, today, let us open ourselves to the Spirit's work in this time and this place and open ourselves to finding new ways to honor the work of the Spirit in each of these new members of the body of Christ.

May the God of Pentecost warm us, disturb us, amaze us, inspire us, empower us, motivate us, reorient us, and kindle God's passionate love in our lives.

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