

## ***“Hang On to Your Hats!”***

A Sermon Preached by the  
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Pentecost Sunday, May 11, 2008  
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church  
Bloomington, Minnesota

1 Corinthians 12:3b-13  
Acts 2:1-21

The wind blows, the fire rages, and lives are changed forever. Toss hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, tsunami waves, cyclones, and volcanoes erupting into that mix, and nothing is ever the same again. Thousands of people die, millions are left homeless, huge portions of the earth are decimated, and we are left reeling with the enormity and mystery of it all. We seem to have both a fascination and a fear of those amazing displays of energy and force that can turn the world upside down in an instant, perhaps because they always remind us of how vulnerable we are, and how fragile the earth is.

We relish the complicated scientific explanations of this tremendous release of energy. It somehow makes us feel a little more in control when we can turn on the television or the radio and know exactly where the storm is, how strong the winds are likely to be, where the wildfire is headed next if the winds don't take it another direction. It is a way for us to make sense of the chaos and disorder brought by devastating wind and rain and flood and fire. If we can explain or understand the phenomenon, if we are assured that we will not come to harm, we can manage our response. But those on the front lines, those who experience the force of that energy first hand, have a much different response.

Imagine then, that you are one of those disciples, on the front lines, all together in one place, when a mighty wind blows the doors off and fills the house. Imagine looking around to see tongues of fire resting on everyone's head, including your own. Imagine opening your mouth and having words come out in a language entirely foreign to the one you've grown up speaking. There are no complicated scientific explanations for it, no sirens to warn of the mighty wind, no news reports of fire, and certainly no warning of an immediate and unexpected ability to speak in tongues.

Better yet, imagine yourself to be one of those gathered outside the house when the wind roars through and being suddenly able to understand the spoken word in many different languages. No wonder they were “amazed and perplexed” as the writer of Acts describes them. No wonder they asked one another, “What does this mean?”

All of which is to say, hang on to your hats. When the Spirit moves, strange and wonderful things happen.

Today is Pentecost, the day we traditionally call the birthday of the church. And we are in the habit of telling the birth story from the Book of Acts, often in different languages as we did at the start of worship this morning. The word “Pentecost” translates as “fiftieth day,” and we celebrate Pentecost fifty days after Easter. Pentecost

is also the Greek word for the Jewish Festival of Weeks, which occurs fifty days after Passover and marks the beginning of the offering of the first fruits of the grain harvest.

Now the writer of Acts would have assumed that the readers knew about the Festival of Weeks. It was, after all, one of the three pilgrimage festivals that devout Jews were expected to celebrate in Jerusalem. It is significant that Jews from all over the known world were present to hear the testimony of the disciples, and even more significant that they were apparently able to understand the testimony in their own language. So the pilgrimage to the Festival of Weeks brings together devout Jews of the Diaspora at a particular time for a predictable event, only to have the most unpredictable happen!

One writer has said, "It was a great day for multiculturalism. It was the Tower of Babel turned upside down and what fell out was a glorious manifestation of the grace of God." That same writer goes on to say that, "It was also a tough day for future lay readers: all those forbidding names – Parthians, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Cappadocians, Phrygians, Pamphylans – that whole crowd. In Luke's geography they represented 'every nation under heaven.'"<sup>1</sup>

Now for such a monumental event, the writer of Acts was remarkably stingy with descriptive material. The disciples were gathered in a house and "suddenly from heaven there came the sound like the rush of a violent wind and it filled the entire house where they were sitting."

In the Hebrew scriptures, wind and spirit are what you might call linguistic twins. The Spirit of God, the Hebrew word is *ruach*, moves over creation and is perceived as wind, also *ruach*, as it works its way through life. Or this definition by a sixth-grader, "The wind is like air, only pushier!" So "When God breathed upon that company of first disciples assembled in Jerusalem, they felt it as wind, but it was really a breath of hope and life, the likes of which no one had ever known."<sup>2</sup>

And then there's the fire, which "appeared to them as tongues of fire, distributed and resting on each of them." I like this description better: "Suddenly the whole place was smoking, and the disciples began to look like so many oversized trick birthday candles, crowned with tongues of fire that even the mighty wind could not blow out."<sup>3</sup> Reading that, I am reminded of a poem entitled "Candle Hat" by our former Poet Laureate, Billy Collins, about the self-portrait of the Spanish painter Francisco Goya, that somehow always makes me think of Pentecost. Let me read part of that poem to you:

"He appears to be smiling out at us as if he knew  
we would be amused by the extraordinary hat on his head,  
which is fitted around the brim with candle holders,  
a device that allowed him to work into the night.

You can only wonder what it would be like  
to be wearing such a chandelier on your head  
as if you were a walking dining room or concert hall.

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Callahan, "Windblown," *Christian Century*, May 24-31, 2000, p. 597.

<sup>2</sup> Peter W. Marty, "A Conspiracy," *Christian Century*, May 8, 1996, p. 509.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

Imagine him surprising his wife with his new invention,  
then laughing like a birthday cake when she saw the glow.  
Imagine him flickering through the rooms of his house  
with all the shadows flying across the walls.

Imagine a lost traveler knocking on the door  
one dark night in the hill country of Spain.  
'Come in,' he would say, 'I was just painting myself,'  
as he stood in the doorway holding up the wand of a brush,  
illuminated in the blaze of his famous candle hat."<sup>4</sup>

Maybe it's the birthday cake image or the "tongues of fire" on Goya's head, maybe it's the idea of being illuminated in the blaze on a dark night that bring the Pentecost story to mind, because Pentecost is an illuminating story of a few "bewildered and broken-hearted men and women" wondering how they were going to live without Jesus in their midst as teacher, brother, friend. And Pentecost was the day they got their answer: that they were going to live, and live with great joy and with the wind and fire and spirit, making them look like a bunch of happy drunks in the midst of a numbingly sober and sad world. But they knew they belonged to God – every last one of them. They knew that God was Love, not just in poetic theory but in palpable fact. And they learned that in belonging to God they belonged also to each other, they learned the power and the joy of being in community.

One of my favorite books about Christian community is *Life Together*, written in 1938 by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer, you remember, was a German Lutheran theologian and pastor, imprisoned and executed in the concentration camp at Flossenberg in 1945. In *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer writes that, "It is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in this world to share God's Word and sacrament." He goes on to remind the reader that Christian community is a spiritual reality, founded solely on Jesus Christ and created only by the Holy Spirit. It is, in the best sense of the word, a conspiracy.

The word "conspiracy" can be interpreted as "breathing together." It comes from the words *con* meaning "with," and *spire* meaning "breathe." On Pentecost, the Spirit of God permitted people to begin breathing together. These days, we don't give the Spirit a lot of credit, and there are times when we don't give the Spirit a whole lot of room. We get pretty cozy and comfortable and settled, and before we know it, we're all getting sleepy from breathing the same stale air. We forget that the Greek word for "church" is *ecclesia* – and it means literally "the called out." To be in the church is to be called out of the world into church. But isn't it also to be called out of the church back into the world? That's when we most need the Spirit to blow the doors open and push us out into the world like so many human tumbleweeds.

The disciples faced the same danger that morning. They were, after all, settled quite comfortably in that room, with the doors closed. Here's the way one commentator

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<sup>4</sup> Billy Collins, "Candle Hat," *Sailing Alone Around the Room*, New York: Random House, 2001, p.30.

talks about it in more contemporary terms. He writes, “We had planned a nice service up there, in the room with the doors closed. Someone looked around at the disciples, the inner circle, and said, “This is the friendliest church in town!” or “Were just like a family!” We had enough hymnals, an attractive and adequate facility, and we were thoroughly enjoying the good fellowship among ourselves.

“And the God moved, acted, and 3000 folk whom we hardly knew demanded entrance . . . and they started asking questions like, ‘Why do you do it this way? This is boring!’ They demanded new programs we had never had before. They knew nothing of the Bible, church tradition, or the way we had always done things. We had to revive our Christian education program. They asked upstart questions. Wanted us to give reasons for why we did things. We had to knock down walls, open doors, and in short, be converted because God had converted all these people!”<sup>5</sup>

On Friday, the long-awaited report on the results of the congregational survey arrived, and I came by the church to pick it up and bring it home to read over the weekend. As soon as we can figure out a way to condense it into a more manageable form, we will make that available to all of you. You will also have the opportunity, if you choose, to read the whole report, but it would be very poor stewardship of our resources to print a copy of it for everybody since it is close to 40 pages long. Rest assured that we will spend quite a bit of time working with it over the next couple of months.

Anyway, if you completed the survey, you know that everybody was invited to write comments at the end focusing on your hopes for the future of the church. Reading through the comments, I noted that there was some of the predictable longing for the “good old days,” but it was far outweighed by the desire for more diversity, for more innovative connections with our changing community, for creative worship, and an excitement about the future. There was also a very clear self-awareness of Oak Grove as a congregation that is growing older but not growing old; a congregation that values its heritage but also knows that you can’t rest on your laurels, as it were, if you’re going to survive.

So hang on to your candle-hats. Transitions are always opportunities for the wind of the Holy Spirit to stir things up. There is no limit to what the Holy Spirit can do. But we have to keep breathing – and breathing together. We can’t hold our breath and hope for the best. We have to breathe deeply and prepare to be astonished. As one writer puts it, “Under the power of the Holy Spirit, shy people have been known to step up onto platforms and say audacious things. Cautious people have become daredevils, frugal people have become philanthropists and people who used to be as sour as dill pickles have become rich with friends.”<sup>6</sup>

Don’t forget that the Holy Spirit is capable of blowing through this community with the same generous intensity and fury as it has for generations before us. So we shouldn’t be surprised if we find ourselves a bit more wind-blown this Pentecost season – and perhaps a little singed around the edges. Thanks be to God! Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> William H. Willimon, “A Pentecost Problem,” *Pulpit Resource*, April, May, June 2008, p. 27.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels*, Cambridge, MA: Crowley Publications, 1997, pp. 72-73.