

Sermon: The Rush of a Violent Wind

New North Church, Hingham

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23 May 2021

Based on **Acts 2:1-21; John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15**

Today, we're celebrating the birth of the church through God's gift of the Holy Spirit. It's good to have a definite start date for significant events.

If I say *July 4, 1776*, you will recognize it as the day we declared our independence from Great Britain and so it's the day we celebrate the nation's birthday. But it was actually July 2, which hardly anyone realizes, and there was a lot going on before that that helped form the new nation. But we celebrate on July 4. Fair enough.

So, why Pentecost to celebrate the church's birth date? The fifty-day Easter season ends on Pentecost, but why 50 days? Why not 40, or 60? The reading from Acts tells us, 'When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.'

That's one reason. Pentecost was a thing before the apostles came along, and it explains why they were all together in one place. Our Pentecost is derived from an ancient Jewish festival which marked 50 days after Passover. Today, it's called *Shavuot*, or *Weeks*. Then and now, it was an agricultural festival to thank God for the first wheat harvest. Was it a coincidence that Pentecost just happened to be the day the Holy Spirit chose to fill the apostles with new life? Or was it just because of the occasion?

Back in April, John told us that Jesus gave the Holy Spirit to the disciples on Easter in the locked room. Today, the Holy Spirit came to the 120 persons who gathered last week to cast lots to choose a new apostle: it's the same group of people.

So, what happened in Jerusalem on that day? Luke reports that pretty much the entire known world was represented in the crowd gathered on the street, from Parthians to Elamites, Pamphylans, Egyptians, and so on.

They all heard the sound of a violent wind and were astonished when the apostles spoke in the various native languages of the crowd. Some were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" A very good question.

Others figured the apostles must be drunk. That's often our go-to explanation for unusual behavior – drunkenness. But Peter sets them straight – they're not drunk, it's only nine o'clock in the morning! Which implies that if you just wait a little while...

Even as he's defending the apostles, Peter is thinking on his feet. He figures things out as he goes. He starts with what he sees and then finds Scripture to help him better understand what God is doing in the present situation. Today, he chose Scripture from the prophet Joel, a passage that promises the arrival of God's Spirit and the prophecy that that will inspire.

Remember the prophecies of Nostradamus? Those inscrutable oracles that may or may not predict everything that has ever happened? That is not the kind of prophecy that Joel promises. This is not about predicting the future.

Joel's kind of prophecy is about figuring out how our circumstances align with what Scripture says about God in the past and with the promises of what God is yet to do. This kind of prophecy needs us to take the Bible seriously as a living word that strengthens our faith and shapes our outlook on society, our relationships, and our lives. The Spirit empowers the church to become visionaries and dreamers, with eyes wide open to perceive God's ongoing work in and for the world. That's the prophetic task.

The problem is, no one seems to think that way anymore.

How can we be amazed and perplexed and prophetic when all of life's mysteries seem to have been revealed through internet browsers and smart phones? Where is our sense of awe? What's our motivation to seek truth and grace in life? As a society, we seem to have lost our ability to find God in the midst of our busy lives. Even those who claim to be spiritual but not religious are disconnected from the Holy Spirit.

In our hubris and self-confidence, we still need a guide to help us see God's grace around us and in each other. We still need to find our way into community with Jesus. The Holy Spirit is that guide.

But the real issue is this incredible group experience. This event in Jerusalem fulfills Jesus' repeated promises in John's Gospel and in Acts, when he told the disciples, "you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:5); "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you" (1:8); and you will be "clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49). This is it; unmistakably, this is the day.

In John's Gospel, Jesus promised to send the Advocate in his place. In the Bible, an Advocate is one who will argue your case in court for you, or who will give you strength, encouragement, and *ability*. For John, the Holy Spirit is that *Advocate*, in Greek, the *Paraclete*, *the spirit of truth*, and the truth is Jesus.

The lectionary left out a few verses in our Gospel reading. After he promised to send the Advocate, Jesus said, "I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling." No doubt, because this is a lot to take in all at once.

In one of the alternate readings for today, the prophet Ezekiel wrote, "The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley;" "Then he said to me, 'Prophesy to these bones;'" "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal;" "And you shall know that I am the Lord;" "I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live" (Ezekiel 37). The Holy Spirit gives life.

But the Spirit doesn't come creeping in like Carl Sandburg's fog coming in on little cat feet. It comes like the rush of a violent wind, shaking the house, filling every nook and corner, getting us up out of our seats and on our feet, wondering what it means.

The Holy Spirit empowers the apostles and all whom the Spirit filled, as it does for us at our Baptism, to do the ongoing work and witness of the church in the world, from then to now.

So, what *does* it mean?

Pentecost connects Jesus' resurrection with the sending of the church into the world in Jesus' name, through the Holy Spirit, plain and simple. Celebrating Pentecost enables the church to reflect on where it has been and where it will go next, to where God continues to call it. This giving of the Spirit is not a one-time event. There is a recurring pattern of the Spirit at work in the experiences of believers, even in the church today.

John wrote that it is the Spirit that gives life (6:63a), and that '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' (3:8). By this, he means that new life comes from divine possibility, not by human choice. But when it comes, we are free to choose to accept it. And it won't feel like a gentle breeze that we may not notice; it will be like the rush of a violent wind, unmistakable and hard to resist. Amen.

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