



The Feast of Pentecost



A Sermon By
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May 31, 2020
The Day of Pentecost
Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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Acts 2:1-21

The Scripture says:

“The wind blows where it wills and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with every person who is born of the Spirit. [John 3:8]

One word – Spirit. In Hebrew, it is, “ruach.” And, by the way, that Hebrew word is a feminine word. In Greek, it is, “pneuma.” In English, it is “wind” which can be also translated as “spirit” or “breath.” And all refer to air and its presence in our lives.

Air – your body is filled with air. If you cup your hands over your mouth and blow, you will feel warm air in your hands. To blow out warm air is a sign that you are alive.

Our planet Earth is one of the most unique pieces of matter in our ever expanding universe. We do not yet know of life any other place except Earth. There is a membrane around the Earth and that membrane is called the atmosphere. There would be no life on this planet Earth without our atmosphere. There is nothing on this earth more powerful than the winds of the atmosphere.

The earth is constantly rotating towards and away from the sun, so there are constant temperature changes and so there are wind currents, streams of wind circling the face of the earth. At their most powerful, they become tornados and hurricanes and we have all seen the devastation that they can cause, especially over the last few years.

The Hebrews, when they thought of God, they thought of – the wind. They thought of the wind because the wind was like God: it was invisible, mysterious and powerful. You can't control the wind. You can't have life without wind. Wind gives life. And so does God who is invisible, mysterious, powerful, uncontrollable and life giving.

The people of the Bible didn't know that wind was the result of changes in temperature. To them, the wind was sheer mystery. Remember the Hebrew Scriptures actually called God, Ruach, Wind. So the first name of God in the Bible is Wind.

In Genesis 1, we read, “In the beginning, there was the earth, and the earth was without form and void, and the Spirit of God, the Wind of God, the Breath of God, the Ruach of God breathed across the face of the waters.” It was like God gave mouth to mouth resuscitation to the Earth and blew life into our planet.

In Genesis 2, we hear the story about God creating humans out of the dust of the earth. And then the Spirit of God breathed into that creature the breath, the wind, the ruach of life.

In the book of Exodus and the story of Moses, the Jews would not allow any images to be made of God. Besides, how do you make an image of the wind? How do you paint that which is invisible? How do you make carvings of that which can't be seen?

In the prophet Joel, God says, “I will pour out my Spirit, my Breath, my Ruach on all people. Your sons and daughters shall prophesy. Your young men and women will see visions and your old women and men will dream dreams. Your servants will all be filled with the Spirit, the Ruach and they shall prophesy.”

And this morning, in the Book of Acts, we hear the story of Pentecost. “Suddenly, a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind and it filled the house where they were sitting. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, the Holy Wind, the Holy Ruach and they all began to prophesy, to speak boldly about Jesus Christ in numerous languages.”

What does all this have to do with you and me, with your life and mine? We all know that you cannot have life without air, without wind. So, in the same way, we cannot have spiritual life without the Ruach, the Breath, the wind of God.

The first purpose of the Spirit is to make God alive in you and me. You and I came to believe and to know that there is a God here in this universe. God – invisible, mysterious, powerful, a God whom you cannot control any more than you can control the wind. This God, this Wind, this Ruach gives life – physical life and spiritual life. This God is all around you, in you, above you, below you, beside you, invisibly present.

God is present with us, whether we feel God or not. When we are good or bad, rich or poor, indifferent or concerned. When we are working, golfing, singing, sailing, hiking, dying or living, God is here. For God is near you, not because you are good, not because you are kind, and not because you are religious. God is here because God is God! The purpose of the Spirit, the Ruach is to make God alive in us.

So what does this mean for us as we celebrate the birthday of the Church?

First of all, the Church is not here to preserve the past, to be the carrier of culture or any of the many other things people try to make the Church do.

The Church is here to give us a place to obey the simplest commandment of Jesus. Jesus said, “Follow me.” The simple truth is that we are to be followers of Jesus. For, you see, we are followers because Jesus is moving; Jesus is going someplace. We are not those who sit at his feet, or lean against him or are sitting around waiting for Jesus to come again – we are those who are following Jesus. And we are not following him around a track that endlessly circles a stadium but following him into the future – for life goes only one way and that is forward. There must be motion, movement, change, discovery, excitement and wonder in our lives as followers of Jesus; and, therefore, there is also dislocation, newness, conflict, challenges and turmoil.

There are those in the church who resist this sense of journey and change and do it in the name of tradition. They forget that our oldest tradition is change. Think of Abraham and Sarah – those to whom God spoke and said, “Ok, now, get up, off your backsides and come with me – for have I got a land for you.” Or Moses who saw a burning bush and encountered the living God who said, “Ok, now, get up, off your backside and come with me – have I got a job for you.” Or think of Paul, who was knocked down on the road to Damascus and encountered the living God who said, “Ok, now, get up, off your backside and come with me – for have I got a mission for you.”

One of the clearest signs of faithfulness is the tension that comes from moving into uncharted domains where no one is an expert and all must rely on the Lord. The task of following Jesus is not the kind of feeling we have when we are squabbling over scraps in a time of scarcity. It is the kind of feeling we have when we are stretching, exploring and making mistakes. We are followers of Jesus because Jesus is going someplace. And, remember, a church that is following Jesus feels a lot different from a church that is hanging around, hanging out and hanging on. We are called to sometimes be Abraham and Sarah – to be Moses – to be Paul – but to always keep moving forward.

And so, the Wind, the Spirit, the Breath, the Ruach of God continues to move in our time just as She did in the time of the first Pentecost. And the Church is called to address the same issues that it was called to address then – the issues that so often make us unconformable just as Jesus made people uncomfortable in his day.

Over my 77 years of life, I have watched the Church move from preserving the past to confronting the past as it moves into the future, preparing for the eventual return of Christ. I have seen the Church in the forefront of the civil rights movement – of the place of women – of the inclusion of LGBTQ people. I have seen the Church moving the Beatitudes – albeit at times slowly and haltingly – to the center of its life.

And now, in the time of Covid-19, the Church seeks to bring us some comfort, some consolation in a time of confusion and anxiety. We all need that. But, hopefully, I have begun to see the Church begin to address some of the underlying problems of our society that Covid-19 is revealing. Why are so many more people of color dying from this virus? Why does a man of color jogging through a neighborhood get shot to death? Why does a man of color being arrested in Minnesota end up dead as bystanders plead for his life and he calls for help?

Sadly, we know the answers to these questions. It lies in the insidious racism that lies at the heart of our society, especially in this country whose roots lie in the bringing in of black slaves, beginning in 1609. Race is part of the very air we breathe. I cannot look at Reverend KA and not see a black man. I cannot look at Reverend Amanda and not see a white woman. What I can do, is look at myself and examine what my reaction to each of them is and how I respond to that reaction. Do I see them as a child of God reflecting the amazing diversity that God has given God's children?

And, if I am walking down the street and I see a young black man with dreads and wearing a hoodie walking toward me, how do I respond? And I know and you know that my response is going to be different! That is the racism that Jesus calls us as the Church to address!

So as the Ruach, the Wind, the Spirit of God moves in us, around us, above us, below us, we too are to be moving – following Jesus and bringing the world to him and to his gospel. That's what Pentecost is all about. Confronting the world with Jesus and his message – his radical inclusivity of all peoples – be they male or female, black, brown, red, yellow or white, gay or straight or any of the other ridiculous ways that we use to divide ourselves one from another. Confronting the world with Jesus' radical bent toward the poor, the outcast, the downtrodden.

Is this time of pandemic, is this the Church's Burning Bush/Damascus Road experience of the call of God? I pray that it is.

Let me leave you with a prayer of blessing that has been for many years my call to action in Jesus' name.

May God bless us with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that we may live deep within our hearts.

May God bless us with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that we may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless us with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and to turn their pain into joy.

May God bless us with enough foolishness to believe that we can make a difference in this world, so that we can do what others claim cannot be done.