

On the Move

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

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Pentecost – Year C

Acts 2:1-21



It all begins with the wind. You remember: “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 from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said...”

That Hebrew word for wind – ruach - can and is often translated spirit, or soul, or breath.

Into that chaotic and formless void, new life, creation, the wind of God preceding the voice of God that brings everything to be, the rocks and trees and skies and seas. All that is, including you and me, created out of the very breath of God, carrying within us the image of God.

When we are at our best as human beings, we recognize this common origin, we can see in one another, hear in one another, the breath, the Spirit, that makes us one. When we are at our worst, we deny the image of God in others, in ourselves, losing that holy connection. When that happens, the chaotic void reasserts itself.

Is this not what we are seeing play out over and over in our world. When a group of people hate enough to drive a van into a crowd on the London Bridge, when a person is so enraged by the presence of a Muslim teenager wearing a hijab and her black friend he demeans them, and then turns in a murderous rage on those who stood up for them, when our common life seems more defined by what or who we are against than what we can do together to improve life for all, when, as David Brooks says, we cease to live our lives by a moral logic, which I take to mean a logic that sees beyond the self to the connections we share and takes responsibility for those connections, then the chaos, the void, threatens to overcome.

Into this world, the wind comes again, blowing over the chaos, preceding a word that brings new creation.

Several years ago I was with a group of friends and family in San Francisco and we decided to drive up into the Twin Peaks area. It was a sunny July day down below, but we arrived in the hills just at the time when the famous San Francisco fog rolls in. My brother calls it God's air conditioner. When you see it rolling across the mountains, coming off the Pacific, there's a sudden beauty to it. But the experience at the top of the hill is quite different. It was suddenly very dark, and the wind was so strong I had to hold onto the railing as it washed over me. It had a distinctive sound, what Luke might call the sound of the rush of a violent wind. And then, as quickly as it came, it was gone. And in its wake, everything felt cooler, cleaner, and I found myself breathing deeply.

Pentecost is all about that wind – the same one that blew over the first creation – bringing a new creation.

The word Pentecost is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word for “the fiftieth day.” The “Feast of Weeks” it was called in Hebrew. According to Jewish tradition, the period of time from Passover to the day Moses received the Law on Mt. Sinai was fifty days. Seven weeks, plus one day. Seven weeks of seven days, plus one day. That one day, added on, for the Jews was significant. Fifty was the number of jubilee; every fifty years all slaves were to be freed, all debt forgiven, it was to be a new day for all the people. There's no evidence that a year of jubilee was ever observed, but the number still stands at the center of Jewish life as a reminder that the God who gave them the Law calls them to a new way of life.

From Easter Day to Pentecost is fifty days, seven weeks of seven, plus one day. The one day is the new day, when the creative wind of God blows again, and new creation. What is it that is created. A group of people called church, a group of people who follow Christ in the world, who are called to see the image of God in themselves, in one another, and in all, a group of people called to move into the world in a new way, showing by the way they live that grace, joy, peace, and love are not only possible, they are why we were created.

I think sometimes we get caught up in the spectacle of this story, and miss the power of it. We get to break out the red, we hear about the wind, we see the tongues of fire, the large crowd gathering, we hear the people speaking all these languages, and the sneers of some that this is all just a drunken spectacle. It is easy to get caught up in it all and miss the radical word contained in this story.

You can hear that radical word come through in a series of words. “They were *all* together in one place.” All of them, the community of Jesus-followers. No one was missing. The sound of the rush of a violent wind filled the *entire* house. Not one corner of

this space was spared, which means not one of the followers was left out. The tongues of fire rested on *each*. Devout Jews from *every nation under heaven* are there and when they come out into the street at the sound, *each* one hears the gospel in the native language of *each*.

In this context of everyone, each, all, entire, comes the roll call of the nations, a tongue-twisting recital of all the nations known to them, including, as Tom Long has pointed out, the Medes, who hadn't existed as a nation for centuries. He says it would be like someone saying today, "We had the cutest little Hittite couple in church this morning." What is going on here?

It is left to Peter to say what is going on. The one who denied Jesus three times rises in courage to declare God's new day, God's new creation.

"On that day I will pour out my Spirit on *all* flesh." If he stopped there, it would be radical enough. *All* flesh. *All*.

But he goes on to define that *all*, to make sure it is not lost on anyone what this means. The barriers fall. Sons and daughters. Young and old. Slaves, both men and women.

The prophet Joel, whom Peter is quoting, uses the language of Old Testament apocalyptic that was always used to describe the day of the Lord, to visualize the radical changes that affect everything – blood and fire and smoky mist, the sun going dark and the moon turning to blood. But it is nonetheless a great and glorious day, not unlike the mighty and violent wind that blows through the hills bringing newness in its wake.

And then the word again, "Then *everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

Pentecost is not just a day for the church but for the world. God's intentions are for *all*. The Spirit binds us as a community of faith. The Spirit is given to the community. And perhaps the greatest gift Pentecost gives us is language that sends us out into the greater community ready to see the Spirit at work not just in ourselves but in our neighbors, near and far, and to join in the Spirit's work in the world.

Someone shared with me that they were walking in Nashville last week among a large crowd. They were carrying bags that contained leftovers from a meal they had eaten. A teenage girl was on the street asking for money. They didn't acknowledge her. As they passed, the girl said, "Could you share your leftovers?" The person sharing the

story said, “I looked at her. She was so small, clearly hungry...hungry enough to eat someone’s leftovers. If she hadn’t said what she did, I would not have really seen her.”

In the beginning God’s wind blew in the midst of chaos, and God created all humankind in God’s image. On Pentecost, God created anew through the wind a new community and gave them eyes to see God’s image in themselves and in one another and in all. To see with these eyes is to walk into a world that flirts with chaos – terror and hate and cynical selfishness – and dare to see and name and live the truth proclaimed in wind and fire today – “I will pour out my Spirit on *all* flesh...” Amen.