

The Wind, The Spirit, Our Breath

Acts 2:1-11, 42-43

May 28, 2023 Pentecost Sunday *Sailing Lessons for the Church #4*

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When the Feast of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Without warning there was a sound like a strong wind, gale force - no one could tell where it came from. It filled the whole building.

Then, like a wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks, and they started speaking in a number of different languages as the Spirit prompted them. There were many Jews staying in Jerusalem just then, devout pilgrims from all over the world.

When they heard the sound, they came on the run. Then when they heard, one after another, their own mother tongues being spoken, they were thunderstruck. They couldn't for the life of them figure out what was going on, and kept saying, "Aren't these all Galileans? How come we're hearing them talk in our various mother tongues?"They're speaking our languages, describing God's mighty works!"

That day about three thousand took Peter at his word, were baptized and were signed up. They committed themselves to the teaching of the disciples, the life together, the breaking of bread, and the prayers.

Acts 2:1-11, 42-43 The Message

Did you know the word “conspire” means to breathe together? Take a breath. Now blow it out. I like imagining we are launching a conspiracy of love and compassion this morning. You can hear the word “spirit” in there too – to conspire – to be filled with the same spirit, to be enlivened by the same wind. Barbara Brown Taylor, one of my favorite preachers, offers us that as a place to start on this Pentecost Sunday. (1)

What happens between us when we come together to worship is that the Spirit swoops in and out among us, weaving us together through the songs we sing, the prayers we pray, the breaths we breathe. It can happen with two people and it can happen with two thousand people. It can scare us or comfort us, confuse us or clarify things for us, make us want to hunker down below deck or push us out into the ocean in a sailboat to find a new port.

Word Ruah

The Holy Spirit is *ruah* in Hebrew and *pneuma* in Greek: breath, wind, life force. The Spirit is the outflowing of the dynamic energy love in action, the energy of life that binds us to God and each other. The Spirit comforts, leads, inspires, and animates. The Spirit of the Holy has always been here, behind the scenes, under the surface reflected in biblical writings– hovering over the waters at creation, filling the lungs of the first earth creature, inspiring of the Psalms of David, quickening the womb of Mary, descending like a dove to claim Jesus as Beloved in the river of baptism. But on Pentecost the Spirit comes out from behind the scenes; the stage

manager takes center stage. Or maybe we would say the Spirit changes from the gentle breeze along the shore to a wind of 15 knots with gusts up to 20 filling our sails and moving us out.

Pentecost is a rather wild story. When Luke tried to capture in words the life and ministry of Jesus, there is something about the word *pnema*. Spirit – wind- breath that keeps him swirling and moving. The writer of Luke wrote down the stories of Jesus in the gospel and the movement of those who followed the ways of Jesus, the early church in the book of Acts.

In today's passage, there they were, women and men, followers of Jesus about a hundred and twenty of them, Luke says, all moping around wondering what they were going to do without Jesus, when they heard what sounded like a holy hurricane headed their way. Before any of them could defend themselves, that mighty wind had blown through the entire house, striking sparks that burst into flames above their heads, and they were filled up with it – every one of them was filled to the gills with God's own breath.

Languages

Then something wild happened - the air came out of them in languages they did not even know they knew.

Like a room full of bagpipes all going at once, (God help them!) they drew a crowd. People from all over the world who were in Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost came leaning in the windows and pushing through the doors, surprised to hear someone speaking their own language so far from home.

Parthians stuck their heads through the door expecting to see other Parthians, and Libyans looked around for other Libyans, but what they saw instead were a bunch of Galileans – rural types from northern Israel dressed in the equivalent of first century overalls – all of them going on and on about God's mighty acts like a bunch of Ph.D.'s in middle eastern languages.

Before the day was over, the church had grown from one hundred twenty to more than three thousand. Shy people had become bold, scared people had become gutsy, and lost people had found a sure sense of direction. Disciples who had not believed themselves capable of tying their own sandals without Jesus discovered abilities within themselves they never knew they had. They were speaking and showing a love for each other and community.

They were doing things they had never seen anyone but Jesus do, and there was no explanation for it, except that they had dared to inhale on the day of Pentecost. They had breathed in God's own breath and they had been transformed by it. It was a moment when this *ruah* caused chaos but also clarity, caused wow and wonder, awe and action.

When the wind blows a sailboat

This windy Spirit blew them out of their small place out into the world.

We have been exploring the theme of what it means to be a sailboat church and not a rowboat church. Remember this is a metaphor and it will only take us so far. In her book *Sailboat Church*, Joan Gray writes - Early Christians used the image of the sailboat with sails billowing in the wind to express their experience of the church. This image casts believers in the role of sailors partnering with the Spirit to go where God wants us to go and do what God wants us to do. A divine-human partnership. She writes that the Spirit in community means: 1) The Spirit is our teacher, our true north. 2) The Spirit is our Advocate & Counselor and give us peace. And 3) The Spirit is the source of power for the faith community. (2)

Last week Elaine Reichert preached about sailboats that are tall ships and how they need a crew. We are the crew. Okay, I am the captain, but what I know as a captain is that it takes all of us to raise the sails we have – meaningful worship, prayer, study, going deeper, contemplative practices, social justice, and more.

Today as we imagine the Spirit is the wind, blowing those sails, and we work together to raise the sails and do the other work on the sailboat. **How do we sail?** What happens? Since I have not been on a crew of sailing ship, I took a brief dive into wind and sailing.

- As one sailing site said, sailors need to know the strength and direction of the wind. Maybe sailing will be day trips, others will be quite long journeys. The Spirit is the energy, the divine power or force that moves us. And we learn the best ways to move into the future. We take our core values. We notice how we can navigate to build on them.
- Sailors have some control. We are making decisions about the sails, the boat our church, the tasks of the crew, the time to rest, the provisions. And when the wind is really blowing, we are not still in the water. We can tack back and forth using, partnering with the wind, the Spirit. It takes practice, patience and there is physics involved. Fun and challenging. This partnering with the wind.
- We are good at sailing. At this time in the life of the church, we are discerning what sails are working well, if any need repair and are there some new sails we need to raise so we can go to some different ports.
- Where are we going? Are we waiting to see which way the wind blows? Do we feel out of control? What if we see ourselves as choosing some destinations but being open to discovering some new ports? We are inviting some new folks to come on board with our 101 class next week. What will some of the newer folks on board say about their gifts, their interests, their questions?

- There are moments in worship, during the week, during a meeting, one on one, in person and on line, when people tell me – something shifted in me, insight, presence. Heart learning and head learning. Sailing, inspired by the Spirit.

Sometimes we share publicly those moments of the Spirit. And other times more subtle. I have learned there is True Wind and Apparent Wind. Let's pretend you are standing on the end of a dock and the wind you feel is 8 knots from the north. This is called the "true" wind. Now I come sailing by you at five knots, heading east. The wind instruments on my boat say the wind I feel is blowing 10 knots from the northeast. This is apparent wind; it's a combination of the true wind you feel, plus the wind caused by my boat moving through the water.

True and apparent wind. Both real. Different. We trust each other on the ship. Being on this ship together involves listening, being open to new understanding, experiences of the Spirit we are describing, and how to move together.

I think Pentecost is about the church, our church, communities of faith discovering that -- together we can be a sailboat for manifesting God's vision, God's dream, for the world.

It's the miracle that God repeats over and over, wherever unlikely friendships are forged, whenever people are strangely empowered to live together in community, when people who gather to worship in a lovely building or on the patio under the redwoods or YouTube, when people work together to make the world the Beloved Community, the kin-dom of God.

Pentecost is the beginning of the church, yes, but it really is the moment when the Spirit gets out ahead of the disciples, pulling them forward into the future that God desires for them, for the world. When all the dreams of those who'd gone before and the lessons learned and the prayers prayed and silence and sharing seem to be pointing to something that you can't quite see. It's a calling. It's movement. It's motion. It is sailing.

What is the Spirit doing ahead of us? What is the Spirit doing ahead of you?

You know it's the Spirit when you're blown as if by wind from the places you're hiding in safety into the place where you risk being known by others.

It's the Spirit when you find yourself living into gifts and using language you didn't know you had, or maybe that you that you've never been brave enough to test out or asking deeper questions you did not know you could ask.

It's the Spirit when it makes you want to love the world more.

Take a breath. Feel the wind blowing. Let us raise our sails, head out, care for our crew, invite others to come aboard, and keep finding our way home. Amen.

1) *Home by Another Way*, Barbara Brown Taylor, Boston: Cowley Publications, 1999, pp. 142-148

2) Joan Gray, *Sailboat Church: Helping Your Church Rethink Its Mission and Practice*. Westminster (2014), chapter 3