

Time to Go Back or Be Open to the Spirit?

Who Are We Now? Series #2

Numbers 14:1-4, Acts 2:1-4

May 23, 2021 Pentecost Sunday

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1 Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. 2 And all the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron; the whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! 3 Why is the Lord bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become booty; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" 4 So they said to one another, "Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt." Numbers 14:1-4

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Acts 2:1-4

I am picking up the story in Numbers 13 where I left off last week. Moses has led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. There is God's promise of a new land and after 6 weeks the people have arrived at the edge. Moses send spies into the land. Two very different reports come back.

Ten saw the barriers. Two saw the blessings and new life. Ten saw giants. Two saw God. Ten saw fortified cities and their faith crumbled. Two had faith and saw the fortified cities crumble. Two said, "The best is yet to be." Ten said, "The best is behind us. All the spies were confronting the same reality – the same facts. Caleb made meaning that led toward going up and into the land, in obedience to God and in reception of the gift of the land. The rest of the spies made meaning that stoked the fears of the people.

Now we hear in Numbers 14 how the people respond. "We should have stayed in Egypt. Let's go back."

Such a human response. The past is known. At least we knew who we were. Being out here taking risks. IN the language of the book at churches adapting, they were facing the Rocky Mountains and they are sitting in their canoes. They have been complaining over the 6 weeks since they left Egypt. Now they want to turn around, elect new leaders and ignore God's promise. The story continues with Moses and God talking. God is angry. Moses offers scenarios. Finally God whose love is steadfast says – this generation will wander in the wilderness before they can enter the promised land. The people try to reverse their decision, but it is too late for this generation. Complaining, consequences and delayed dream.

So we are here today in the new unknown land of the post lock down not quite June 15 world of opening up. We are hopeful. We are unsure. We want a land of milk and honey, but maybe we will settle for water and a piece of bread.

Sometimes in our spiritual lives we long for a bit more confidence and clarity and less mystery and unknown. How is Divine Love, God moving in our lives? In our being and doing?

I have talked to many people throughout my ministry who are experiencing shifts in their experience of the Holy. It is exciting and disturbing. Sometimes they wish they could go back to when they were more confident in what they believed about God, about the church, about the Bible, about good and evil, about systemic racism, about sexuality. And yet.... they know they cannot go back. There is a new land and new season ahead.

What happens when we are faced with moments large and small of shifts, of change, of revelations, of experiences that change our hearts, – go back or be open to new ways of being? How does God invite us?

The followers of Jesus were struggling with some of these questions in the days and weeks after his death, encounters with the Risen Christ, and threats from religious and civil authorities. The liturgical calendar tells us today is one of those moments when we focus on a day of change, of shifting, of decisions, of the movement of the Spirit.

This Sunday, the church celebrates the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit is poured out upon the followers of Jesus, releasing them from their fear, their worries, their quarantining themselves from the world.

Maybe this year, this story we remember every year will speak to us in a different way.

Like those followers of Jesus so long ago, we have been huddling in our homes, quarantining ourselves from the rest of our world, surrounded by fears, worries, and questions about where God is in the midst of a pandemic.

Like those followers of Jesus, who were filled with questions of what the future might hold, and with the promise of the coming of the Spirit into their lives, we too have struggled with the hope that the future is held in God's hands, hoping that the Spirit of healing and hope would come into our lives.

And it has, hasn't it?

Not like that mighty wind that tore off the shutters and flung open the windows that day, but that gentle breeze of persistence which kept us on the road of masking, social distancing, trusting the science.

Not flames dancing on our heads, but those lights that burned through those long nights as researchers tested and tried, tore up their notes, and tested and tried again, until the vaccines were developed.

Not the gift of speaking in tongues, but the gift of compassion to share from our privilege with those who lost so much. The gift of community as we cared for the people in our neighborhoods. The gift of grace as we learned to ways to serve those around us – food, rental assistance.

This year, this Pentecost, it seems like we are moving from some of our fears, worries, doubts, and questions, to dream about being a church that is engaging with the our neighborhood and communities and proclaiming in large and small ways the gospel of love, hope, justice, and grace. (1)

It's Pentecost, our celebration of the origins of the church by the dramatic entrance and movement of the Spirit, Sophia.

Jesus' friends are depressed, frightened, closed in, praying, alone. The spirit strikes suddenly, frighteningly—like a mighty wind—and blows them out into the streets. Things change. New ways of being God's people are forged.

The spirit can be a mighty wind. The word πνευμα (*pneuma*) means both spirit and wind.

When the spirit wind blows into a community of faith or into you, it is the kind of thing that knocks you off your feet with wild unpredictability. It is getting accepted to the school of your choice or landing the job you've always dreamed of or a graduation or the birth of a new grandchild. It is like new love, or like a dog hanging its head out the window of a car going 60 miles an hour,..... It is getting great news from the doctor. It is a bunch of children giggling,. It is the people in a congregation rallying for hunger programs or housing options for the unhoused or getting excited about experiencing a variety of forms of worship.

But the spirit isn't always mighty wind. *Pneuma* can be translated three different ways: as spirit, wind, or breath. Sometimes instead of wind, we get only a breath. A whisper. The tender hug of the One who cares, supports, loves, rather than the fist bump of exhilaration. Not the excitement of new love, but the familiarity of a long-time love. Not the dog hanging its head out the window of a speeding car, but dozing in the sun.

The whisper of the spirit is the exhale you make after you've heard bad news and realize you have been holding your breath. The whisper of the spirit is the sigh of a sleeping child. The whisper of the spirit is the sound of bagpipes at the end of a memorial service, breath and music offered in a good-bye and letting go.

The whisper of the spirit is the quiet voice of encouragement to get up and try again. The whisper of the spirit breathes life into a home or a community that needs it. It gathers up the ones who are waiting outside the upper room, waiting to be invited in.

We have experienced time this past year of being alone and worried. The Spirit came to us even there. And Spirit works in our gatherings – in person and on Zoom. She leads us out into the world, helping us find the right words and acts to be Christ's love and light in our own community, being instruments of the mighty wind and quiet whisper so that everyone might experience the wind of exhilaration and the whisper of encouragement. This is both power and gentleness. This is the legacy of spirit.

I will close today by a reading by Rev. Julia Seymour that invites us to be open to the Spirit.

The day came and they were all in one place, in one place, in one place.
Being together, being in one space, breathing the same air, saying the same words
had seemed like the most important thing.
The most important thing.

Then there was a sound- like a rush of wind.
Then there was a sound- the sound of things changing
Then there was a sound- suddenly nothing was the same.
Those who were gathered received new languages.
Those who were gathered received new dialects.
Those who were gathered received new understanding.
Those who were gathered received new power.
Those who were gathered received the Holy Spirit in a new way.

It became clear immediately that what was important had changed.
Immediately it was clear that
What was important had changed. Immediately. That was clear.
Being in one space was not a priority.
Speaking in unison was not a priority.
Being all together to breathe the same air was not a priority.

The power of the Holy Spirit rearranged their priorities to align them with God's.
God's priority of diversity,
God's priority of widespread grace,
God's priority of neighbors and community,
God's priority of stepping out, reaching out, being out in the world.
The world that God loves.
The world that is God's priority.

Being aligned with God's priorities, it felt, it feels like being on fire. (2) Amen.