

THE WIND OF GOD  
Acts 2:1-21, Romans 8:22-27  
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Thomas D. York  
Knox Presbyterian Church  
Cincinnati, Ohio

We hardly know what to do with Pentecost. It barely seems Presbyterian! It is so out of control and emotional.

It calls for the suspension of the rational, and requires us to be attentive to the mysterious within us and beyond us, especially beyond us, as the focus of Pentecost moves us away from the life of Jesus to the work of the Spirit in the community of believers.

It is the most threatening of Christian festivals for buttoned up, socially conservative types. Because if you stand too close to it, it musses up your hair and singes your toupee. It seems so out of place, and outsiders experience it as disruptive. Like the loud and inebriated couple in the fancy restaurant who have the money to eat there but not the polish, no one knew what to do with Pentecost at first. It took Peter himself to explain it.

The point of Pentecost is that God is doing something new, all the time. And God comes and overturns the plans we have laid and upsets the routines that we have so carefully preserved, demanding that we rethink what we have taken for granted. Like the coming of a thunderstorm that moves in so quickly after we have set the picnic table with the checkered cloth and the paper plates. God blows it all away with a mighty gust of wind and a streak of fire cutting the sky. Suddenly we have to pack and run, and who knows where we will finally eat.

So goes the most familiar version of Pentecost found in the book of Acts. The disciples were gathered in one place, when suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a mighty wind filling the house. Divided tongues as of fire appeared and danced above their heads, and they spoke in foreign languages, as people from all over the Mediterranean heard and understood what the disciples were saying. It was the miracle of speaking and understanding what was said.

But there is also another reading of the work of the Spirit that is different from this boisterous, and heated display of pyrotechnics, which is an important story to hear, but not the only story of the way God's Spirit comes to us.

This other is the quieter, gentler work of the Spirit described by Paul in his letter to the Romans. "The Spirit," Paul says, "helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words." And here is the other way in which God's Spirit moves among us, like a sigh, like a gentle breeze. Prompting us, inspiring us. Our better angel I suppose, helping us to be, by the Spirit, better than we had imagined we could be, greater than we have yet seen that we are.

And we know both sides of this Spirit of God moving among us, its rough and cleansing wind, and its gentle breeze and sighing breath as well, it's just a matter of watching and waiting. For the Spirit, like the wind, blows where it wills, and we hear the sound of it, but we do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

I remember the time I once spent with a confirmation class. We talked about worship and what I learned was the sermons are too long. The focus is always on adults and never on kids' issues. The music is out of touch. The service is irrelevant.

I have to admit I was defensive at first. Maybe I still am. I don't think I always take the side of parents in sermons. And I think I do use some illustrations that include kids. And yes, a lot of the church's music was written in centuries prior to the one in which we are living, but it's good music nonetheless.

I had a host of good reasons why I should discount what the kids were saying. But the one thing I could not discount, as rough as the winds were that seemed to be blowing out of their classroom, was the possibility that theirs were tongues speaking in a language that I think I understand.

The Spirit of God may take us where we do not want to go at first, but it pushes us, nonetheless, to that place where we must go, if we are to be faithful to God's leading.

The winds are blowing strongly in our denomination these days, and sometimes fires break out that are so intense that it's hard to know what is of God and what is of God's clueless servants who are trying the best they can to be faithful in their own faltering way. The Presbyterian Lay Committee, Presbyterians for Renewal, the Presbyterian Coalition are all fostering an approach to the church's major concerns that are very different from the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, the Witherspoon Society, the More Light Presbyterians, and the Voices of Sophia.

But for all of the wrangling that is going on, the wind that blows between opposing parties, and the fire of heated exchange, the question I keep asking is, "Is there anything in it that is of the Spirit, shaping our church in these days?" Sometimes it feels to me as if we are only fighting over lifeboats on the Titanic in this denomination! But at other times I think perhaps the very imposition of our denominational disagreements may be the cleansing wind of the Spirit that will, at the last, be the best thing that has happened to us.

I do know that in the local congregation we are working on other issues, more immediate, more formative for us at a local level.

People are struggling with fundamental questions. How to hold their marriage together. How to find the courage to face the chemotherapy. How to find meaning in a job that seems meaningless. How to help your parents face the problems that are tearing your family apart when you are a thirteen-year-old with more problems than you can handle already. How to live with HIV and its debilitating medications.

Sometimes the Spirit that we need is not so much the disruptive, strong and cleansing wind of change, but the calming breeze of the Spirit that comes at noon or in the evening to cool the day and settle the soul.

Paul says we don't know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And there is the other side of God's Spirit, the same Spirit that at times is disruptive in our lives confronting us, calling from us change - that same spirit can sometimes come to us with healing in its wings and peace in its embrace.

God seems to know what we need. Sometimes a swift kick in the seat of the pants. Sometimes a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning.

I think about the way in which sometimes the gentle breeze of friendship comes into my life, maybe even into my office, when I least expect. Someone who opens up to me, and I to that other person, with all of the vulnerability that it takes to risk being who you are, and to encounter who that other person just as she or he is. It is such a surprise sometimes the way in which our lives become the means by which God's presence is mediated, with all its healing balm, and its encouraging peace.

I think about the way in which the children teach us by the Spirit's prompting. The simple things that we who are older pass by become the fascination of their eyes' delight. The twig on the sidewalk, the leaf in the grass, the caterpillar on the window screen, the moon's half phase. They stop, and look, and wonder, and ask the questions that we have long ago stopped asking, and in so marveling show us the way to recovering our better self, to seeing the beauty and the wonder of the world, a world less cluttered by all the stresses and worries that weigh on us so heavily. There is something of the Spirit in that view, when you stop standing so tall that you overlook what is about you, but stand instead, only high enough to see.

And I wonder if it is not the Spirit of God who is present most assuredly when in the evening, and the dishes are done and the still of the night closes in. And you are rocking in the chair on the porch with your child or grandchild cradled in your arms sleeping. The gentle breeze of the night passes by you, and the branches and leaves of the trees move with an unseen presence. Is there anyone here who will say that it cannot be the Spirit of God who is there in such a treasured moment interceding for us with sighs too deep for words?

And then, of course, there is this table where the Spirit draws us together.

I think about those who gather around this table. The varied experiences of our lives and how some of us limp to this place and others of us are blown by the strong winds that are pushing us where we do not want to go. I think about those who are struggling with the pain that life is laying on them - physical and emotional and spiritual pain that is like a crucible, grinding and refining, and bringing them here for some blessed peace, for strength to go on.

I think about some of our young adults, graduating from high school looking to the future awe struck by its limitless possibilities. And our college and advanced degree graduates who are launching into careers where the limitless possibilities are now narrowing a bit as they focus on a future that is both fearsome and thrilling all at the same time.

And I think about the retired couple who are thoughtful about the number of years that lie ahead for them, the goodness of having raised a family, and the pleasure of finally having some time for themselves.

They are, we are, gathered here by the Spirit of God, to receive what our hearts most need and our lives most crave. The grace of God, which is what this table is all about. Bread for the journey, and cup for our travels. The gifts of God for the people of God.

In John's gospel there is a resurrection story. It's not a very well known account. The lectionary assigns it as a kind of alternate alternate lesson for Pentecost. Not many people ever preach on it, so it's not well remembered in the church.

The disciples are gathered in a room locked away for fear of the officers of the Temple, not to mention the Romans. Jesus has been crucified and Mary has told them a report that they can barely believe, that she has been to the tomb and that the Lord is risen.

Suddenly Jesus appears to them, though the doors of the room are locked. He says to them, "Peace be with you." And he shows them his hands and his feet, the wounds he has suffered for them. And they rejoice because they know it is he who greets them.

At the very end of this story of meeting with the risen Jesus, he breathes on the disciples, and he says to them, "Receive my Spirit." And then he sends them into the world, having given them what they most need.

Brothers and sisters, sometimes God comes to us with winds so strong that it would knock your socks off. And other times God comes to us like the very breath we breathe, gently, easily, quietly, like a sigh. And both are the signs of a Living God who is among us.

Jesus invites us to this table today with the same invitation and even the same blessing that he gave his disciples so long ago when he breathed on them and said, "Receive my Spirit." The table is set and all are invited. Come in faith. Receive his Spirit. Thanks be to God. Amen.