



May 27, 2007
Pentecost

Acts 2:1-6

The Creativity of the Spirit

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There is a dangerous side to God. It has nothing to do with judgment and everything to do with his creativity. At Pentecost we remember God's passion for blowing away our safe plans.

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This is the real beginning of the Pentecost story: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was without form and void; and darkness covered the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." (Genesis 1:1) The word for spirit in the Hebrew is "ruach." The same word can also be translated as "mighty wind." Some of our contemporary translations say, "A wind from God swept over the face of the waters." It is to say the same thing. The Holy Spirit is a mighty wind that moves across the dark chaos that had settled in, pushes it aside, and creates life in its place.

Later in the Old Testament, that same wind appears again blowing across the Red Sea, splitting it in half, and making a way for the Hebrews to leave slavery. Then they begin the journey to a new life in the Promised Land. Much later, the mighty wind reappears rushing across Ezekiel's valley of dry bones, bringing them back to life with God's breath.

On the day of Pentecost, the disciples were huddled together in the sanctuary of their upper room, and suddenly a violent wind from heaven appeared—inside the house. Don't you think these good Hebrews knew something was up? They had heard all of the biblical stories about the great Ruach wind called Spirit. They knew about creation, the Red Sea, and Ezekiel's valley of dry bones being brought back to life. So when all of a sudden they were being tossed around by a powerful wind, they knew that God was at work with the gift of life.

The question is, do you know that? When the winds of change sweep through your family, your community, your life, do you know what it means? When your safe plans are blown out the door, and when you are forced to move into a strange future that you had not planned, do you realize that this may be the Spirit of God who insists on leading you to a new life?

The world can be a harsh place. It pushes us around all the time with relentless schedules and pressing demands. Like the first disciples who nestled together in their familiar upper room, we, too, look for places of sanctuary. Someplace where we are safe, where we can let down our guard, and where we can find refuge in the familiar and predictable. Perhaps home is that sanctuary for you. After an exhausting day of work surrounded by wolves and snakes, it feels good to come home where you don't have to be defended and can shut the door on your problems. Or perhaps church is your sanctuary where you are free to rest your weary soul and find inspiration in music and carefully spoken words. Or maybe you thought that Jesus would keep you safe. After all, isn't that why we call him Savior? No, Jesus isn't really that interested in keeping us safe.

The last words the risen Christ spoke to the disciples before he ascended into heaven were to promise that the Holy Ruach of God would come upon them. Then they would have the power to fulfill their

mission in life. And ten days later, at Pentecost, as the disciples were hiding in their safe upper room, the wind rushed down upon them and blew them out of their sanctuary into the waiting world.

Sanctuaries are good places. We need them to find rest and the renewal of vision. But whenever we use our safe place to resist change, the sanctuary becomes a tomb. Things that do not change are dead, including our lives. But you can stop living long before you die. All you have to do is to retreat into how it used to be. But your retreat is then a tomb. Jesus doesn't care much for tombs. He didn't even stay in his own for long, so don't expect to find him in yours. Expect him to send his Spirit to breathe life back into you by pushing you to a new place where you can only live by faith, which is the only way to be fully alive.

The word Pentecost simply means fifty days after Passover. On this day the Jews were celebrating the Festival of Weeks, or as it was also called, the Festival of Harvest. It was supposed to be a time of remembering God's faithfulness in providing the winter crops. Year after year, century after century, the people perfunctorily went through the motions of giving thanks to the God who provides.

It was similar to the way many Americans celebrate Memorial Day. It has become an opportunity for a day off from work, maybe a picnic, and some perfunctory acknowledgments of those who gave up their lives to provide freedom. But maybe this year, with over 3,400 soldiers killed in Iraq, the memorial will have a tad more meaning for us. Whether you believe this is a just war or not is beside the point. These are men and women who died for us. And if we are paying attention to our heritage, we will also remember the 60,000 killed in Vietnam, the 35,000 killed in Korea, and the 400,000 who lost their lives in World War II. Half of a million American soldiers have died in the last sixty years! When we add to that the numbers from other countries who died in these wars, the figure is too staggering to comprehend.

None of them were permitted the luxury of staying in a safe place.

A few weeks ago, I went with my family to visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. Once again, I traced the name of my adopted brother Roger, which is etched into the wall. As I stood there, I remembered how full of life he was as a boy, much like the two boys who stood beside me. And I remembered the letters he wrote to us from the war. And the terrible telegram. We also took the boys to the Korean Memorial and to the new WWII Memorial because we want them to know that people died to give them what they have. It is a bit overwhelming to spend time in all of these memorials. But it all came into focus when we climbed the steps of the Lincoln Memorial that sits up high looking over all this sacrifice. There I read the words, "Here we highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain." That's why we remember.

What the war dead tell us is that no one gets to keep their freedom by playing it safe. You may not have to go to war, but you will have to take on the great struggle for your own freedom and for the freedom of those enslaved by poverty and injustice. The war dead will also tell us that we must accept the gift they were dying to give us and to live our lives, to grab hold of the wild mystery of life, and to be free of the tombs. We have to choose life, or the soldiers will have died in vain.

What Pentecost tells us is that the Holy Spirit will push you into this life. The wind forces all of the disciples of Christ out of their safe places in order to follow the risen Savior who is at work in the world. For where he is, there is our life and our freedom.

I believe God loves us too much to let us dry up with anxiety about our own lives. I believe that just as the Ruach blew life into the old Hebrew festival of the Harvest, reminding them of the goodness of a God who provides, and just as that mighty wind transformed frightened disciples into bold apostles who were seized with a passion for their mission in life, so is there a mighty wind blowing across your life. It is the creative Spirit of God.

It may not be welcomed at first. This wind may push you far from the place you prefer to be. And it may feel at first as confusing and disruptive as it did at the first Pentecost. It could begin with the loss of a job, an unwanted move, or the failure of a dream. It could pull you away from people you love. But if this wind has come from heaven, it is only meant to carry you to the place God has dreamed for you—the place where you will be able to do what you were created to do.

In that mission you will find your life. It won't be easy; it never is. It will cost a lot; it always does. And it will be risky. If it is safety you want, get a tomb. But if you want to be fully alive, then follow the wind. Amen.