

Sunday, May 19, 2024
Psalm 104:24-34; Acts 2:1-21
“The Day the Heavens Burst Open”
The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching

There once was a traveling evangelist who always put on a grand finale at the end of his revival meetings. Before his final sermon, he would secretly hire a small boy to sit in the ceiling rafters with a dove in a cage. Toward the end of his sermon, the preacher would shout for the Holy Spirit to come down, and the boy in the rafters would dutifully release the dove and all would shout in awe – the spirit descending like a dove! So at the end of one revival meeting, the preacher raised his arms and exclaimed, “Come down, Holy Spirit!” But nothing happened. So he raised his arms up again, “Come down Holy Spirit!” Still no sign of the dove. The preacher looked up and heard the anxious voice of the small boy call down from the rafters, “Sir, a yellow cat just ate the Holy Spirit. Shall I throw down the yellow cat?”

Happy Pentecost! Wasn't it so great hearing all of those languages? We call Pentecost the Birthday of the Church because it is on this day that the Christian church began. But actually, the Jewish Festival of Shavuot or Pentecost, which means 50, has a long tradition which continues in the Jewish religion today. It occurs 50 days after Passover and is the celebration of the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai. Thousands of people from many different nations gathered back then in Jesus' time, as they do today, for the great festival of Pentecost.

But back then, they must have had trouble understanding each other – for even though they shared the same faith, they didn't share the same language. And God knew there was a whole world who didn't know about the life and ministry and death and resurrection of God's son; a whole world who did not know about this man Jesus of Nazareth, who spoke about God personally, who enjoyed eating and drinking with unpretentious and impious people, who could miraculously heal others, but who himself was tortured and killed and rose from the dead; a whole world who didn't know about the gift of eternal life. So God decided to do something about that, on that particular day of Pentecost.

And just like when Moses ascended the mountain to stand before God - and fire and wind, thunder and lightning surrounded him; with smoke going up from the top; the sound of heavenly trumpets, and the voice of God gave Moses the 10 commandments – just like what happened all those years ago - - now on that day of Pentecost, in that small room, among the followers of Jesus, the spirit came again. Suddenly the apostles of Christ heard a noise; it filled the entire room; so loud was the roar of wind that it sounded like a tornado – they covered their ears, peeked out through their fingers, and saw streams that looked like tongues of fire or light dancing through the air, pouring down upon them. It was as if the heavens had burst open!

And they ran from the house, grabbed people passing by and told these visitors about what they saw and heard and felt. Suddenly they were telling the story that had changed their lives, and telling it so everyone, regardless of their language, could understand. And the people understood them, because by the power of the Holy Spirit, they were able to speak in each person's language. But, of course, some in the crowd heard these frantic followers, speaking different languages, filled with the Holy Spirit, and shouted, “They must be drunk!” They made fun of them, sneered at them! And that is when Peter comes out.

And Peter begins to preach to them – the very first Christian sermon ever. Remember Peter? He was the disciple who when things got rough, denied even knowing Jesus three times! How amazing it is that Peter now preaches the very first sermon! His sermon lasted only 3 minutes – wouldn't that be nice - but a few thousand people were converted and baptized that day because of it! Must have been quite a sermon!

When the day was over, the church was born, and the meaning of Pentecost had been fulfilled. The message was clear, it is not enough that we simply know the commandments of God; we need to live by them. How do we do this? As the story continues, it tells us how the people then spent time together in worship, in their homes, praising God and helping other people. That day, the spirit descended upon everyone and enabled them all to break through barriers of language and culture and brought them into one community of worshippers of Christ.

And yet as fun as it is to think about a birthday party celebrating the beginning of the church, think about that room for a moment, violent roaring wind, smoke filling the room, fire dancing above their heads! This day was not meant as a day of celebration and party hats, this was the day the disciples were literally pushed out the doors of safety to testify, to go out and change the world. And everyone is bewildered and astonished and thinking they are a bit crazy. This gift of the Holy Spirit is not meant to make us celebrate with party hats, either but is meant to push us into acting, being, doing, sharing.

I recently read an article entitled, "Sailing with the Spirit". How many of you like to sail? We used to have a very large sailboat. My favorite part of having this sailboat was inviting another couple to come along and we would motor about one mile out, drop anchor, and enjoy wine and cheese and watch the sun set. My kind of sailing. Which wasn't really sailing at all. One year we thought it would be great to take our, then, small children for a vacation on the sailboat. The plan was to sail from the marina in Norwalk, CT up to Mystic, CT and stay for a few days, and then onto Block Island for a few more. Did I mention I get seasick? Well, I soon learned that when the wind is great, it was great. A little scary as the sailboat would lean but kind of fun. But when the wind died or a storm came, it was not fun. As we approached one marina, we lost power and my husband had to sail into the dock, not fun. On another day it was raining and blowing so hard, I finally said, "get us to land now!" But on the days of sun and pleasant wind, it was quite beautiful.

So back to that article, "Sailing with the Spirit." The author writes, "Early Christians used the image of a sailboat to symbolize their experience of church. As the wind moves a boat filling the sails, so the church is powered by the Holy Spirit moving on, among and through the body of Christ. Unlike a rowboat that moves across open water mainly thanks to human effort, sailing involves a partnership between sailors and the wind. The wind is key here: no wind, no sailing."

You see Jesus didn't say to those first disciples, go immediately and tell the world all about me, salvation, eternal life, all of it; he commanded them to wait to receive the power of the Holy Spirit. And "through this spiritual transformation, [on Pentecost] despite all their human imperfections, they sailed into God's future in mighty ways and turned the world toward salvation. The church is a reality because they allowed God to fill their sails and take them where God wanted them to go." We too need to do the same because it's not where we want to go, not where we want our church to go, it is where God is moving all of us. How we become a sailboat church.

The author names four characteristics we need to be a sailboat church, a church of the Holy Spirit. First, we need to be passionate about God. Passion is not about emotion; it is about commitment. Being committed to searching for the ways God is moving us into the future. Second, we need to practice sanctified imagination and discernment. What hurts many congregations is a failure of imagination, when a church cannot imagine God is doing a new thing among us. We need to imagine what it is like to sail, not row on our own, but sail by God's wind into the future. Third, we need to discern the Kairos or the season we are in and respond. Where are we now and are you preparing for the new to come? And fourth, we need to live by prayer, praying for the Holy spirit to move us, allows us to dream dreams and see visions and speak in new ways. (1) Like those disciples of old, we too need to draw that breath, sing again a word of hope and joy, to be heard and come alive again in this place and in this community.

Why sail? Well, just look at the world of today, we live in a state of confusion and chaos, we are a scattered and increasingly disconnected people. In Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes-Lonely World, Surgeon General Vivek Murthy emphasizes the importance of building a more socially connected future to stem the rise of loneliness, division, anger and resentment. Social connection stands out as a huge unrecognized and underappreciated force for facing the critical problems with which individuals, our society and our world are currently dealing. And social disconnection grows into a larger problem when severely lonely people are so preoccupied with their own emotions that they have little energy for empathy.

As one pastor writes, the miracle of Pentecost is the cure for this. "It is a beautiful reminder of God's desire for us to be a people connected, to strengthen our sense of community, to understand and empathize with one another." And the best part is the ability to speak and listen to those different languages. "Conflict and disconnection often boil down to a lack of communication or misunderstanding. Pentecost is the church's annual reminder that the Holy Spirit not only calls us together but equips us to listen and learn from one another, to grow in understanding and empathy, to be God's people and Christ's Church together." (2)

Last year on Pentecost, if you remember, do you? Well, talked about the gifts of the Holy Spirit: Wisdom, Understanding, Discernment, Courage, Knowledge, Piety, Wonder and Awe, and Faith. And you came forward and took one those gifts written on the cards that look like flames off these trees and we talked about those gifts in the weeks that followed. Today I want you to do something a bit different. You have all received a blank card that looks like a flame. This year, I want you to think about your specific gifts, your God-given Holy Spirit filled gifts and take a moment to write one or more on your flame card and during the last hymn I want you to all come forward and place them on a tree as a symbol of offering them up to God.

So, think about your gift or gifts that you give in serving God here in this church and in this community. Gifts like singing in the choir, cooking for the Warm Shelter, sewing for Sew Good Souls, Quilting, Painting or fixing up our church property, baking for fellowship hour, reading as our Worship Assistant, visiting our homebound, praying for those on our prayer list, teaching children at our Vacation bible Camp, fixing up homes for Habitat for Humanity, organizing food at the Johnny Cake Center, delivering items for refugees relocating in our area, preaching here on Sunday morning, so many gifts! Write them down and let us continue to use our gifts to further the work of God in this place and in this town, and in this world!

As one author writes, the breath, the Holy Spirit is what gave those scared lost grieving disciples in their lock-down, new life again and sent them out to sing their joyful gospel to all. And it is through us as well. For it is through art, music, song, study, craft or kitchen that God's inspired life is lived out. Through every act, leap of imagination, or clear intuition or innovative plan, the church needs to come out of its dark, dusty closed down ways and spread its wings under the spirit and take flight.

Having wings is another beautiful image like sailing, for wings allow us to take flight and glide on the breeze by the Spirit. And wings also remind us of the hovering dove, held up by the air, balanced – not being thrown from the rafters! – but keeps us in balance. And the Holy Spirit is not only God's breath upon us, God's living water pouring down into our hearts but it's also the fire of God's energy burning within us and lighting all around us. (3) Let us once again hear the invitation to embrace the Holy Spirit in our lives and feel its power guiding us, sailing for us, the wind beneath our wings, and see where it is moving us.

Which reminds me of a slogan that a church in Kansas City put in their bulletin:

Wake up, sing up, preach up, pray up, stay up, pay up,
but never give up, back up, or shut up,
until the cause of Christ in the church
and in this world is built up! Amen.

(1) Gray, The Rev. Joan S. Sailing with the Spirit. The Presbyterian Outlook, October 2023.

(2) McDowell Ott, the Rev. Teri. Looking into the Lectionary. May 6, 2024.

(3) Mitchell, Cathy. Toft St Andrews, May 2021.