

Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'"

Today is the day of Pentecost. I hope you've taken the opportunity to drive past the church and see how it has been decorated to remind our community of this very special day of the Christian year. Don't worry if you haven't yet, everything will be up for another week.

Pentecost is the celebration that often receives the least amount of recognition from the church. Christmas and Easter are the big two. Christmas, for the birth of Jesus and — sadly — its extreme commercialization. Easter, for the resurrection of Jesus, the indispensable heart of what it means to be a Christian. You can't be a Christian without believing in the resurrection of Jesus.

But then along comes this holiday (which itself is an English word that combines the words "holy" and "day"), this Pentecost, which is associated with a remarkable event: the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Ah, the Holy Spirit. It's something we talk about but really don't understand very well. Unfortunately, when we hear the word "Pentecost" what often jumps in our minds is the word "Pentecostal." And the word Pentecostal conjures up images of people rolling around on the ground, making all kinds of strange sounds which they claim are "speaking in tongues." We may remember certain congregations or religious leaders who have taught all kinds of strange things and claimed they have special powers given to them by God.

Believe me when I say that not all, or even most Pentecostal churches are like that. It is true that many Pentecostals are rather exuberant in the worship style, but their essential message of the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ is no different from ours. Pentecostalism arrived in this country in the 1900s at a time when much of worship was very dry and distant from the needs of people. Pentecostalism was very much like its namesake — a fresh wind blowing through the church. There is no doubt that even we use some modified Pentecostal practices in our own worship.

But, like so many things in life, it only takes a few extreme leaders or congregations to create a false impression. No doubt there are a few well-known church leaders who have politicized the Evangelical movement. There are a few evil priests who have made the entire Roman Catholic Church look bad. And yes, all these extremists from different branches of the church, including ours, combine in the mind of the public to make non-church-goers think that all churches of all denominations are corrupt, evil organizations full of hypocrites. To an extent, I can't blame them.

But this, friends, this is what makes Pentecost day so important and so special. Typically, the color red is associated with Pentecost. The red, of course, symbolizing the fire, the flames that the scripture said rested on the heads of the disciples. But somehow, we overlook the other manifestation of Pentecost: the wind.

Recall that our passage today said Pentecost began with "the rush of a violent wind." Recall the first words from the book of Genesis: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept

over the face of the waters.” Recall our gospel passage from John today: Jesus breathed on his disciples and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’ Holy wind. Holy breath.

Wind. How do we think about wind? It can be gentle, like a spring breeze scented with new-mown grass. It can be violent, blowing trash cans and knocking down trees. Wind can sweep the leaves clean off the sidewalk or it can blow sand and soil destroying gardens and flower beds. Wind can sculpt amazing rock formations in the desert and it can hurtle snow and rain so fast that it can damage or destroy our homes. The power of wind can be both subtle and overwhelming — which makes wind a perfect metaphor for the power of God. Like the effects of the ever-changing wind have on our surroundings, the ever-changing power of God has on us.

How has God acted in your life? Can it not very much be compared to the action of the wind? Sometimes, God comes to us like a breeze, gentle and soothing. There are always times when we need a light breeze in our lives to refresh us and heal us. Sadly for many of us, we don’t take advantage of the light breeze nearly often enough. Like the person who chooses to stay cooped up inside on a beautiful day, we often don’t acknowledge the spirit of gentleness blowing through our troubled lives, calming us, soothing us, relaxing us.

We are all going through incredible stress at this time. Even as some restrictions on social interaction are easing, many will remain in place. Regardless, for example, of whether they choose to do away with face masks or not, I’ll be wearing mine for a long time whenever I go out into a public place. It just makes sense. Just as I don’t want to get Covid-19, I don’t want to give to anybody, either. What can relieve us of the anxieties we experience daily? The fears of hearing about loved ones, the concerns about reopening schools, the simple decision of whether to eat out in a restaurant. All of these are just immediate concerns, let alone dealing with the overarching worries of will we have a job or how can our economy stand with so many people unemployed?

Let God in. The first and most important message we proclaim is that God loves us. God is with us. God is for us. It is the gentle spirit of God that can remind us that we are loved, we are not alone, our biggest supporter is the Lord God who made us. Let God in. Let the gentle breeze of God’s tender care flow all over you. Let the breath of our Lord Jesus fill you. Let God’s presence in your life touch your own spirit so you may know, really know, that you don’t have to face this world all by yourself.

And yes, God does not just gently touch our lives like a calming breeze. God’s spirit touches us — or should I say, blows us away sometimes. On Pentecost, the rush of God’s spirit was described as being like “the rush of a violent wind.” Now violent winds are scary. Many of us lived through Superstorm Sandy as it hit New Jersey. I’m sure some of us have been through tornados and hurricanes. It doesn’t even take one of those but just a strong Nor’easter to disrupt our lives. Winds are often destructive. They are scary. They remind us how powerful the forces of creation are compared with anything we humans have come up with.

But the ironic thing about these violent winds, especially the hurricanes, is that they are an essential part of the cycle of nature. Hurricanes often provide relief from drought. Their little cousins,

monsoons, are an indispensable part of agriculture in India and Africa. Hurricanes scatter seeds. The tear down some seashore areas, but build up others. The fresh water flushes away salty marshes, allowing new plants to grow. In short, hurricanes, as violent as they are, are agents of change.

Perhaps that's why on that Pentecost day the spirit came like the rush of a violent wind — because violent winds change things. Violent winds destroy some things which can no longer survive, leading to the building of new, stronger things that can survive. Violent winds destroy, yes, but all of us live in homes that were built on land which was destroyed in part to make way for the house. Trees were destroyed to provide wood for the house. Bricks where the clay that made them was dug out and burned. Every piece of food we eat comes from something — plant or animal — which was destroyed in order for us to live.

In other words, creation and destruction are bound together. They represent change.

Pentecost, as far as the followers of Jesus are concerned — back then and right now — Pentecost represents both creation and destruction at work in the world.

Let's start with destruction. The winds and fire of Pentecost can be symbols of destruction. What was being destroyed that day? The arrival of Pentecost destroyed the idea that the church of Jesus Christ was going to grow all by itself. Up to that point, the disciples huddled in fear together in the upper room, wondering what to do next. Last week, after Jesus ascended, we found them in prayer. They had no idea what they were supposed to do next. Sure, they had spent a lot of time with Jesus and witnessed many remarkable things, but how would they translate these experiences into spreading the good news of Jesus' love and forgiveness? Well, Pentecost destroys the idea that "someone else" was going to make it happen. No, those tongues of fire appeared on everyone who was in that room, individually. God's Holy Spirit appointed each one of them to go out into the world and get to work spreading the good news.

That is a notion that needs to be destroyed today, not just in this church, but in all churches. Pentecost is the stunning reminder that we cannot keep Christ to ourselves. Those of us who are listening to this service are here in part because we believe that God in Jesus Christ has entered our lives and touched us and changed us and made us into different people than we would be otherwise.

If this is true, as we know it is, then we have no choice but to share our experience, our transformation, our re-creation with the whole world. The Holy Spirit has literally destroyed our former selves in order that we may emerge as new creations, anointed by God to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ. Are we uncertain? Of course. Do we know exactly what to do? Not entirely. Might we fail? Entirely possible — but if we fail, we get up and try again.

The winds of Pentecost, like the God who sent them, comes into the world as the prophet Jeremiah said, "To pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow," but then, "to build and to plant."

So the reverse of the coin of Pentecost is creation. We are here to build and to plant. What does that look like?

With God, the idea of building and planting is as open-ended as the horizon. Pentecost calls on every one of us to be builders and planters. On that day two thousand years ago, the disciples emerged from that Upper Room, energized and unafraid, telling everyone about God's deeds and power. They spoke in different languages and everyone present in the crowds could understand what was being said. Every one of us has the same power today.

The apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome. "We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness."

All these are spiritual gifts given to us which we can use for building the church. The question for us is not whether we have them, but how shall we use them?

Friends, building the church is holy work that we are all called to do. Last week, we started our engines realizing that because Jesus is no longer physically present on earth, we have to take His place. Now, we are off, using the spiritual gifts provided to us by the Holy Spirit, empowering each one of us to say and do remarkable things.

So often, I hear people say, "Well, I can't do this, and I can't say that, and I have to do this at home, or work." That's OK. It is good to know our abilities as well as our limitations. None of us can do everything, or at least do it well. It is far better to ask for God's help in figuring out what we can do with our lives and our spiritual gifts than to claim that we can't do anything.

I like how some of the news shows these days are telling the stories not just of the doctors and scientists leading the research into how to defeat Covid-19, but they are also telling the stories of some of the women and men who, in their own ways, are making a difference in the lives of others. Perhaps it is the cashier at your supermarket who enables you to buy food. Perhaps it's the cleaner at the hospital, getting rooms ready for the next patient. Perhaps it's the grandparents watching their grandchildren so the parents can work at home online in peace. Every one of us has gifts. Every one of us has abilities. Every one of us can do something to build up this thing called the church — why? Because that is what God created us to do so.

Let us break out today, break out from our own upper rooms of doubt, fear, and questioning. Let us feel the rushing wind pushing us out of our comfort zones and into places unknown and untried. Let us sense the tongues of fire resting on our heads, filling us with God's spirit to go out and make a difference. We have been given the best job in the world: Spreading the good news of Jesus Christ to a world that badly needs to hear it. Get ready, get set, and Go! And, we're off!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.