

“Set Your Sails”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
Pentecost Sunday
May 23, 2021

First Scripture Reading: Acts 2:1-13

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

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”



Sermon: “Set Your Sails”

Today we celebrate one of the defining moments in the history of the Christian church. We often call Pentecost “the birthday of the Church,” because that is the day when the Holy Spirit fills the disciples and really inspires and empowers the start of the early church. But contrary to what you may have heard, Pentecost is not the day the Holy Spirit came into the world. Though that’s the way a lot of folks have traditionally thought about it. You see, the Holy Spirit has always been in the world.

In Genesis, at the very beginning, the world is formless and void, but the Spirit of God is there, moving back and forth over the face of the waters; brooding over the deep.”¹

Joseph² who interprets Pharaoh’s dreams and Joshua,³ the successor to Moses, are both described as men in whom is the Spirit of God.

And in the story of Samson, he of the super strength and the long hair and questionable relationship decisions, we learn that in his youth the Spirit of the Lord began to stir in him⁴ and that on three separate occasions, he exhibited great feats of strength after the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him.⁵

And Isaiah describes the promised Messiah saying:

²*The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him...*⁶

Now, you might not have noticed because there is so much going on in the Biblical story, but from Genesis to Revelation, there are numerous descriptions of and references to God’s Holy Spirit. We may remember Pentecost as the day the Holy Spirit came upon *the disciples*, but the Holy Spirit has *always* been in the world.

Part of our confusion comes from the way we understand the Trinity. There’s God and God’s son, Jesus, but what is the Holy Spirit? We tend to think of God and Jesus as people that we can be in relationship

with, but the Holy Spirit as a thing; a power source, something to tap into. But the Holy Spirit is actually the third *person* of the trinity. You see, to have a trinity; a “God in three persons,” you can’t have two people and one thing. You must have three people. And the Holy Spirit is the third person of the trinity, God’s presence in the world, and She has always been here.

So, what we celebrate today is not the arrival of God’s spirit, but the disciples experiencing that Spirit washing over them, filling them, and empowering them to do the work of God’s Kingdom. By the power of God’s Spirit they are enabled to speak in languages that they’d never known. They share the gospel message and people from all corners of the world are able to hear it in their own language. But while that is an impressive thing, it is just the beginning. Because Jesus’ command for them had been to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the father, son, and holy spirit, and teaching everything Jesus commanded them.⁷ 11 people trying to reach out to the whole world? How could so few ever hope to even begin a job so large, alone?

Well, who said anything about them having to do it all alone? Pentecost is that moment when God’s spirit in the world sets about urging and molding and shaping the early church and then moving and pushing and encouraging the early church to grow and spread and become what God envisioned it being. Those first Christians were the tools, but God’s Holy Spirit was the carpenter.

And see, that’s why God’s Holy Spirit is so important in the world and that’s why Pentecost is so important to the church. Because there is so much that we are supposed to do, and we simply can’t do it by ourselves. But thank God we don’t have to, because the Holy Spirit is with us, guiding us, strengthening us, putting us in the right places at the right times to use the gifts and skills God has given us to build the Kingdom.

In thinking about God’s Spirit this way, it’s hard not to be reminded of a parent. As a child there are just so many things that you have to do that can be scary: first days of school, doctor appointments, going into the hospital to have your tonsils taken out, going over to the neighbors’ house to apologize for breaking their window with your baseball. I had to do all of those things growing up. And I was scared every time. But my mother was always there with me walking beside me, giving me advice, holding my hand or giving me a little push when needed. She couldn’t do those things for me, but her guidance was important when I didn’t know which way to go, and having her there beside me gave me the strength and the courage to do what I needed to do. And that’s a good way to think of the Holy Spirit. Because the Holy Spirit is always present, always comforting, always leading us.

In the Greek of the New Testament, the word for Spirit is “neuma”, which is also the word for breath or wind. Which is very appropriate. Acts tells us the Spirit came with the sound of rushing wind. In John’s Gospel, Jesus tells Nicodemus “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”⁸

I’ve always liked that image of the Holy Spirit as a wind moving where she will. Because when the wind blows, you basically have two choices: resist, or let it take you where it wants you to go. There’s an old poem entitled *’Tis the set of the Sail* which goes in part:

*One ship sails East, And another West,
By the self-same winds that blow,
’Tis the set of the sails and not the gales,
That tells the way we go.*⁹

The wind of the Spirit is always moving through our lives and we can choose to push against her or set our sails to go wherever she takes us. And that can be a scary proposition because riding the wind means by definition, giving up control of where we are going. When you open yourself up to the leading of God's spirit, there's no telling where you might end up. Bear in mind that I went to college with every intention of going to law school and then the foreign service. I used to brazenly tell my friends that "By the time you have kids who are learning about the US Ambassador to the United Nations, it'll be me." Mary began her adult life with a business degree, managing a restaurant. Neither of us expected to be where we are now. But somewhere along the way we both felt the Holy Spirit leading us onto different paths. And we chose to follow. And maybe that's the most important part of all this.

Because we like to talk about the spirit as an irresistible force, but she's really not. When the wind blows you always have the choice. You can either set your sails and let the breeze take you where it will, or you can leave your boat tied up at the dock. Following God, being led by the Holy Spirit has always been a choice. God has never been one to force God's people to do anything. In fact, practically the whole Biblical story is God trying to convince God's people to do God's will rather than their own thing. And that is still true today.

The Holy Spirit is God's presence in the world. And she is always with us, leading us, guiding us, accompanying us on our journeys. And in that presence, there is peace. But we are challenged by that presence, too. Challenged to allow ourselves to be led, to be guided, to accept the journey to which we have been called.

God's Holy Spirit led Mary and me into the ministry, but that doesn't mean you are being lead in the same direction. I am certain though, that the Spirit *is* leading you to be a disciple. How and what that looks like specifically, is between you and the Holy Spirit. And you'll find it, if you are open, if you are listening, if you are willing to be led.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world, and the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Genesis 1:1-2, RSV & MSG

² Genesis 41:38, NRSV

³ Numbers 27:18, NRSV

⁴ Judges 13:25, NRSV

⁵ Judges 14:6 & 19, 15:14, NRSV

⁶ Isaiah 11:2, NRSV

⁷ Matthew 28:19-20, NRSV

⁸ John 3:8, NRSV

⁹ Wilcox, Ella Wheeler. "Tis The Set Of The Sail -- Or -- One Ship Sails East." *Poemhunter.com*. C. Ekrem Teymur, 2 Apr. 2010. Web. 1 June 2015. <<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/tis-the-set-of-the-sail-or-one-ship-sails-east/>>.