

“Wind, Fire and What Happened Then”

Acts 2:1-21

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Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

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Wind! Fire! All we need is “Earth,” and we’d have a great name for a rock group. Oh, wait: that’s been taken!

But there it is: Dr. Luke’s testimony that the birthday of the Christian Church was a sound and light show like no other. Christian writer Ann Weems has written that we ought to wear safety helmets, such is the power of the Gospel.

Nobody expected this, even though Jesus promised at his ascension that the Holy Spirit would come upon the disciples “not many days from now.” And certainly nobody expected this at the first Pentecost, a Jewish agricultural festival on which the first fruits of harvest were brought to the temple to honor God. Yet Dr. Luke’s testimony in Acts 2 makes it clear that the birthday of the Christian Church was no ordinary Jewish harvest festival! The Pentecost pandemonium of tongues of fire, rushing wind and the cacophony of a multiplicity of languages must have sounded like the tornados that have ravaged America’s midwest: frightening and scary but also exciting and energizing! After all, those gathered were “amazed and astonished.” (2:7)

For those first disciples on that first Pentecost, this energy was the fulfillment of a promise. Jesus promised them the Holy Spirit: “*Wait in the city,*” he said, “*until you are clothed with power from on high.*” This promise was not just a post-Easter Day promise at the end of Christ’s 40 days of earthly resurrection. It was also a promise he gave to them on the darkest, longest night of his life: the night before he died. The Advocate, the Spirit of Truth – other names for the Holy Spirit - that he promised them that night have now been fully delivered on the Day of Pentecost. The disciples, who had been mostly hiding out of public view, found their backbones stiffened and their hiding ended as they were launched into the public square. This too was frightening and scary but also exciting and energizing!

And why is that? Because it is to be expected that the world, even the religious world, will persecute the followers of Christ. On that first Pentecost there were skeptics and scoffers. The naysayers said *“Those enthusiastic, idealistic, demonstrative people: they’re drunk.”* St. Peter had to remind them that this was predicted by the prophet Joel: the (Holy) Spirit would be poured out on all. All people. Everyone. No exceptions.

This is why all the languages and cultures are mentioned by name, much to the anxiety and consternation of liturgists everywhere. These names that we sometimes stumble over – Cappadocia, Phrygia, Pamphylia; Elamites and Parthians and residents of Mesopotamia – are named because Dr. Luke wants to make it clear that everyone hears, in their own language, God’s deeds of power. Everyone. No exceptions.

And here’s another thing. Pentecost reverses the Curse. No, not *that* curse. Boston did that in 2004, much to the chagrin of all Yankee fans. (See me if you’re not a baseball fan and I’ll fill you in.) I’m talking about the curse of the Tower of Babel in the book of Genesis. In building the Tower of Babel the people were trying to usurp the place of God, so God confused our language that we might know again that God is God. Now, in this marvelous Pentecost reversal, God uses the diversity of language and culture to deliver one powerful message of unity through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Still, as with the first Pentecost, there are skeptics and scoffers today. “Reinforce the borders, draw in the barricades, and circle the wagons” is the base message to some. Make sure that folks that don’t look/sound/act/emote like me are excluded. Live in fear. This is the world’s way.

The Church’s way, the way of the Spirit, is as it has always been: to live in faith, to draw the circle wide and hear in our own languages about God’s deeds of power (2:11). Pentecost magnifies the Easter message from a small band of chosen followers to the prophet Joel’s assertion that “all flesh” will have the Holy Spirit poured upon them (2:17).

That message resonated in the first century, notwithstanding attempts of the Roman Empire to harass and persecute the early Christians. The Church grew quickly, on fire with the power of the Holy Spirit but also with the power of changed lives. I'm always disappointed on Pentecost that we stop reading the story at verse 21 because Peter, like most preachers, keeps on preaching. He preaches for conversion and he preaches for a response and he gets it in verse 37: *"Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles 'Brothers, what should we do?' Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"*

Repentance is not bad news, much as we might be inclined to think so. In the original Biblical Greek it is *metanoia*, literally, "to turn around," to turn away from destruction and toward life.

What does that mean for us? At a personal level, this is a personal decision. Each of us must wrestle with what draws us away from God. We know all the idols, right? Greed, power, lust, addictions, pride, envy, ill-will, among many others.

At a corporate level, Pentecost gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, to share with the whole world. Our problem is that too often we in the church act as if we are sitting inside my 4 cylinder Toyota Yaris, when we are actually behind the wheel of an 8 cylinder RAM pick-up. Charles Spurgeon was a 19th century revival preacher who was asked to preach a sermon defending the Bible. He is reported to have replied: *"Defend the Bible? I would sooner defend a lion. Just unloose him and let him go!"*

If the Church is waning in influence, what are we doing about it? Are we reconnecting to the power of the Spirit? Or do we number among those of whom G.K. Chesterton spoke when he said: *"Christianity has not been tried and found wanting, it has been found difficult and not tried"?*

Today's VISION 2024 Reveal is our best response to the movement of the Spirit at Woodbury United Methodist Church. Is it

perfect? Probably not: few things are in this life. But is it pretty darn good? You bet! And is it inspired? Absolutely! The word “inspired” comes from a root meaning “God-breathed,” and I believe God’s breath and hand are surely on what will be presented today.

A part of the presentation will be a surprise, though some have opined that the surprise has not been well-hidden. No matter! To be open to God’s surprises is essential to Christian faith. It is when we think we have all the answers, and tell ourselves that nothing ever changes, that we join the scoffers at Pentecost.

Instead, might we be open to the Spirit entering our lives in new, unexpected, unplanned, interrupting yet perfectly delightful ways? The Rev. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, after a long struggle with his faith, was surprised by the Spirit. On May 24th, 1738 – 286 years ago this Friday - he attended a prayer meeting that he didn’t want to go to and heard words that he’d probably heard 100 times. But this time, **this** time, they broke through. He wrote, *“I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away **my** sins, even **mine**, and saved **me** from the law of sin and death.”* The grace of God to which he testified launched the Methodist movement of which we are heirs.

Several years ago I led the memorial service for Dennis Darak, chair of the Staff-Parish Relations Committee at my former church. Dennis was a particularly effective Chair, often buffering the many competing voices that thought I was entitled to their opinion in telling me how I should do my job and to whom I should answer.

At my 2018 retirement from that church, and knowing of my love of railroads, Dennis made this caboose. When he called me near the end of his life to ask if I would conduct his funeral, his first question when I returned his call was *“Do you still have the caboose?”* I did, and he told me with justifiable pride how he made it and particularly was able to figure out how to curve the roof by making small slices in the fiberboard material.

I took this caboose to his memorial to use as a visual reminder of Dennis' attention to detail, kindness, and love. But when I turned it I noticed, for the first time I could recall, a sign he had put on the back platform. In larger letters the sign said, "*The end.*" But in smaller letters he wrote "*Or just the beginning.*" It was certainly appropriate for my retirement. And it was certainly appropriate for Dennis – always adventurous, always curious – whose death was but for him the beginning of life.

So what does this mean for us?

It means that the white altar cloths and Christ candle are put away for another year as Pentecost ends the Easter season. Or it means that Pentecost is just the beginning of a bold, Holy Spirit-inspired life of faith. It's up to you and me.

It means that Pentecost can be an historical event, or just the beginning of today's new adventure, offered every day, of a bold, Holy Spirit-inspired sharing of VISION 2024 with a community and world hungry for good news. It's up to you and me.

It means nothing: we come, we go, and nothing changes. Or it is just the beginning of "Wind, Fire and What Happened Then." What can happen, in newer and deeper ways and paraphrasing our mission statement, is that we be "*a welcoming Christian fellowship who celebrate and share God's love with everyone, [seeking] a closer relationship with Jesus Christ...inspired by his example...to be God's Gospel and serve through worship, study, mission and community support.*" It's up to you and me.

Say "yes!" Because "*whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved:*" saved for the purpose of being partners with God in redeeming and reclaiming the world. Amen.