

Pentecost (2020)
Acts 2:1-21
1 Corinthians 12:4-12

We are still in the midst of pandemic and Covid19 is still around us. Based on the numbers of deaths and positive results in tests, the world is still in danger and it is difficult for us to know what to do and how to do even the most basic things of life. Our Bishop in Wisconsin has recommended that United Methodist Church not resume public worship before June 21, so we continue to look forward to being together again, but don't know what that will look like. We have been rather immobilized into a hold and a pause. It's almost like we are stunned, confused, and uncertain in our waiting.

As I was preparing for this sermon today, I was reminded of the story of a woman and her parakeet Chippie. It seems that the woman was cleaning Chippie's birdcage with the long hose of a canister vacuum cleaner when the phone rang. She reached over to get the phone, and as she did, she heard the unmistakable sound of Chippie being sucked up into the vacuum.

Immediately she rushed over to the vacuum, pulled out the vacuum bag, and ripped it open. There she found Chippie, totally stunned but still alive. Since the bird was now covered with soot and dirt, she grabbed him and ran into the bathroom, held him under the faucet and washed him in freezing cold water to get all the soot and dirt off. When she finished, she saw the hair dryer sitting on the sink. She turned it on and held Chippie up in front of the blast of hot air to dry him off. A few weeks later, she was talking to a neighbor about the incident and the neighbor asked how the bird was doing. "Well," she said, "Chippie doesn't sing much anymore. He just sort of sits on his perch and stares."

Is that us? Does this Waupun United Methodist Church just sit and stare off into the future without a plan or ideas or dreams of where God is leading us and how God is recreating us? What comes next? How do we relaunch into a church that tells the old, old story in new ways and in a different kind of church?

On the day of Pentecost which we heard about in our Bible reading from the Book of Acts today, the Holy Spirit arrives with power upon 120 disciples of Jesus gathered in an upper room. They begin preaching publicly, and thousands of pilgrims from nations far and near hear the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ in their own languages. Wouldn't it be amazing to see something like that happen in this Church? Don't you wish you could see them some Sunday in your church? Wouldn't we wake up if we saw flames of fire descending? What if there were flames over all the heads of the people who are participating in this worship service today or watching at another time! Some churches expect to see some of the signs of that day every day! Hopefully people will see the Holy Spirit at work in us... tongues or no tongues!

When was the last time something totally unexpected happened during Sunday morning worship or another time in your church? How long has it been since you completely lost track of time at worship because you were so "caught up" in the spirit of a prayer, a song, a speaker or even a vision? Is church the last place you expect to find something new, fun and exciting going on? When we do get back together again, pray that the Holy Spirit will raise the roof, do something totally unexpected, even "off-the-wall," and open some Holy Spirit holes in our lives.

If these things aren't happening, perhaps it's time to reevaluate why we claim to be a Christian church. It has to be more than something that came with our family history – more than something our spouse drug us to. Claiming the name of Jesus has to be more than a social norm we are expected to conform to and more than a social club where we can catch up with our friends, family and neighbors. Claiming to be Christians must mean

a life born out of love and passion for Jesus. Perhaps as we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, we should take the time to consider what powers us as believers. Claiming the gift of the Holy Spirit blows a new wind into our lives and into the life of our Church.

For thousands of years, no one thought that the wind could be measured. But then, in the late 1700s, a cabin boy in the British Navy began to keep a meteorological journal so that he could stay on top of weather conditions. His name was Francis Beaufort, and he grew up to become a Rear Admiral, serving the Navy for 68 years. Over the course of his career, he developed a method for describing the wind that became known as “The Beaufort Scale.”

According to Beaufort, wind can be identified as “calm,” “light breeze,” “moderate breeze,” a “gale,” then a “storm,” and finally a “hurricane.”

Beaufort’s definition of “calm” is a “sea like a mirror.”

When a “light breeze” is blowing, you see small wavelets on the water, and the crests don’t break.

A “moderate breeze” creates small waves, while a “strong breeze” generates large waves, white foam crests and probably spray.

When a “gale” is beginning to blow, you see moderately high waves and crests that begin to break into sea spray.

A “storm” is defined by very high waves with long, overhanging crests. The surface of the sea takes a white appearance, and the tumbling of the sea becomes heavy.

And at the top of the scale is a “hurricane” — a wind condition you don’t want to see firsthand! “The air is filled with foam and spray,” says Beaufort, and the sea is “completely white with driving spray.”

With his descriptions of every condition from calm to hurricane, Francis Beaufort created a way to describe the wind — a scale that is still in use today.

It was a windy day in Jerusalem when the apostles gathered to celebrate the Jewish harvest festival known as Pentecost. The power of the Holy Spirit came roaring into that gathering of frightened, uncertain Jesus-followers like a mighty wind.

But how can we measure the force of that holy wind?

If we were to adapt “The Beaufort Scale” to “The Spirit Scale,” what would that look like? How do we experience the Holy Spirit in our lives today?

Calm. This is the condition we experience when the Spirit leads us, equips us, and gives us serenity and peace. “Peace be with you,” said Jesus when he appeared to the disciples after his resurrection. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Then he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit,” giving them the power to forgive sins (John 20:21-23). When the Spirit Scale reads “calm,” we are given peace and a sense of purpose — we know that we belong to God, and that we now possess a sense of direction.

This Spirit-scale calm is something we feel even though our lives may be buffeted by hurricane force winds. Whatever the nature of the external wind that is assailing us, the calm of the Spirit keeps us on mission, on point, and on message. We are unmoved. We are unfazed. We are experiencing the “calm” of the Holy Spirit.

Strong breeze. At other times, the Holy Spirit comes as a “strong breeze,” a Spirit-wind that has a creative quality to it and leads to surprising improvements and new directions in our lives. In the Bible, this is seen in the “wind from God” that swept over the face of the waters at the moment of creation, bringing order out of chaos (Genesis 1:2).

When we head into a situation where new directions, fresh opportunities and unlimited possibilities face us, we look to the Holy Spirit for the “strong breeze” to empower us according to the will of God.

Gale. Higher up the “Spirit-scale” is the “gale” force wind, a force that breaks unhealthy patterns and shakes up the status quo. In a world that so often fights fire with fire and responds to violence with even more violence, we are given the power we need to go in a different direction. Evil is not effectively resisted with hatred and with guns. The only response to evil that has ever worked is the response of Jesus ... and that is to lead a life of love. That means what it has always meant: visiting the sick, giving to the poor, helping those who need help, sacrificing for the good of others.

This is a powerful wind, one that can knock us off balance and push us out of our comfort zones. We need to ask ourselves: Are we willing to be blown in this direction?

Hurricane. Finally, at the top of the chart is the Spirit as a “hurricane.” This is what hit Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, turning the lives of the apostles and the world completely upside down. They were reoriented from looking inward at themselves to looking outward toward a world in desperate need of the gospel. They were changed from fearful disciples into fearless evangelists, and they headed off into the mission field with a powerful sense of purpose.

We used to call this “revival.” When hurricane force Spirit-winds blow across the landscape of our souls and our common life together, nothing is ever the same.

Our witness as church on this day as on that day can be exactly what Peter declared it to be—the beginning of an entirely new era, an era in which we still find ourselves at the generous if also frightful mercy of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon all people.

Today is a day to remember the era in which we actually live—as Peter announces—and live as a church of Jesus Christ in the flow of the Spirit in every way you can—not just in worship, but in all the ways the Spirit already flows among and through and even without you whether you gather for worship or live as Christ’s representatives in the world. The Spirit has been poured out upon all flesh, sons and daughters prophesy, the old dream dreams and the young see visions.

In Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, he addresses the outpouring and flow of the Spirit in more concrete ways—as a power that flows in and through everyone who has been baptized by water and the Spirit in nearly as many ways as may be imagined. Paul’s list of gifts here is expansive, but by no means exhaustive. Every disciple of Jesus Christ who is walking in the power of the Spirit has been given many gifts, not just for use within the Christian community—whether a congregation, or a small group study-- but to bless people wherever we may go as representatives and embodiment of Jesus Christ.

God is not stingy with His gifts. The Greeks said that fire was stolen from the gods, and that the gods were jealous of their fire and wanted to keep humankind in the mud. The Bible tells a different story. Our book says that God loves us so much that God cannot bear to see us trudging along in mediocrity, going through the motions of existence, killing time until our life sentence is finished or until your church is dead. Far from being jealous, God wants infinitely more for us than we could ever dare dream. So God gives us the fire of Pentecost, the fire that is the Holy Spirit.

The truth is that the church -- no matter how stodgy and out-of-shape she has become -- is still in God's hands. The church's future is never predictable or plotted out because the Holy Spirit, the life-giving breath of the church, blows up storms and whirlwinds without any notice. God will do what God will do.

It can be a rough ride, but there are some things the Church can do to ride the wind. We must:

Get on Our Knees: For the church to keep on its toes, it must first get on its knees. The church must learn how to pray together and praise together. Of course, worshiping God isn't restricted only to church, but too often church is the last place people expect to have a religious experience. The church needs to have an appealing, attractive, engaging, energized and energizing worship experience that is God-breathed, Christ-centered and Spirit-driven.

The Spirit must be allowed to circulate through the sanctuary, pushing us to our knees at unexpected moments. Can the Spirit make us smile, or even laugh out loud in church? Church is not just the place where we come to "think about God" for one hour out of the week. It is a place to feel God with all our emotions and all our being.

Pour Out Our Hearts: It is easy to forget who and what the church is. To outsiders we may look like any other organization. We have developed a daunting bureaucracy which generates lots of business and busyness. But the church is not an organization we join, it is an organism of which we are living members. Pentecost reminds us that our purpose is to be none other than the body of Christ. We do not need a nice building, a good choir, well-run church school, or any ordained clergy to be a church. We need the Spirit of Christ in order to be a church.

Extend Our Hands: In spite of difficulties and challenges, the church has managed pretty well to offer helping hands to people in need. We run soup kitchens, stock food pantries, offer showers and shelter, dig wells, provide nets to combat the spread of malaria. But there should be a difference between being a "good citizen" and being the church. The body of Christ isn't dependent on denominational structures and agendas for its urge to serve the world. The 21st-century church must relearn what the 19th-century church knew so well -- that the strength of hands increases the farther away from home they reach.

Spread Our Wings: Finally, the church must be willing to "trust the Spirit." We cannot take flight under our own power. But we can prepare for the flight of a lifetime.

There are some Christians who think that the very same extraordinary signs that were exhibited on the first Pentecost occur for every true believer in every generation. Do we believe that those same signs can occur right here in this Church, in the building or outside in our homes and community?

Pentecost happens for someone everyday. Sometimes it happens in the most unlikely places and to the strangest people and at the most inopportune times, but it happens just the same.

Pentecost happens because we too often allow our bonfire faith to dwindle down to a mess of dying embers and ashes.

Pentecost happens because people who meet Jesus Christ are excited to tell other people about him.

Pentecost happens because we lack "holy boldness," and we hide our lamps under bushel baskets. The Spirit comes and pushes and prods us. We are called to be witnesses of Jesus moving in our lives and in our world: we're not called to be indifferent bystanders.

Whenever Pentecost happens, we have all the resources we need to carry out our commission and be the Church God calls us to be. If we don't have those resources now, God will provide them. Jesus will supply us with the means to transform lives, and He has equipped His followers to obey his command: to go and make of all disciples. All these things are possible because Jesus' life is now part of our lives through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The phenomenon was startling on the Day of Pentecost; it still is, and it is also very necessary! It happened then and it can happen now. We have been, in a way, on hold because of the pandemic, but hopefully we have been waiting, actively waiting, as we prepare for a relaunch of church, to be an active force in our lives and the lives we touch.