



“When Change Blows In”

Scripture – Acts 2:1-42

Sermon preached by the Rev. Jenny Warren

Sunday, May 19, 2024

Six months ago, I was sitting where you are, listening to Tom Long teach about the development and changes in the Christian funeral. Were you here that day? Many decades earlier, I was sitting in his classroom at Princeton Seminary – my second year, his first. Then, as now, he taught with an endless store of stories. And one of the earliest of his that I remember is this: Early in his career, as a brand new pastor at a small church, he had a group of three girls in a Sunday School class. The week before Pentecost Sunday, he asked them if they knew what Pentecost was, and got three shaking heads and shrugging shoulders. So he told them that “Pentecost was when the church was seated in a circle and tongues of fire came down from heaven and landed on their heads and they spoke the gospel in all the languages of the world.” Two of the girls took that rather calmly, but the third stared with eyes and mouth wide open in disbelief. “Rev. Long,” she said – with both excitement and disappointment – “We must have been absent that day!”

We shake our heads and smile in that “kids say the darndest things” kind of way. But we should be in awe of her faith – she actually thought such an amazing act of God could have happened right in her church! She could imagine that the Spirit came to her church family and changed them! Can you imagine? Can you imagine?

The Holy Spirit blew into town, into a room in Jerusalem where Jesus’ followers were gathered. According to the book of Acts, the Spirit blew in right between the selection of a new apostle and the description of the way the believers lived together: breaking bread, praying, listening to the apostles’ teachings, serving those in need. You might say, the Spirit came in the midst of a search process, and a worship service with fellowship hour. In other words – a day not unlike today. Can you imagine? Can you imagine?

Now the Spirit’s coming wasn’t news to the disciples. Jesus had told them. Jesus had promised them that they would not be left alone – that the Spirit would come to guide them. But knowing something, and experiencing something, can be two very different things. And, in all fairness to the disciples, Jesus hadn’t exactly mentioned the wind and the fire. And we’re not talking about some gentle breeze, either – one translation names it as the sound of a tornado. That sound, and the sight of flames above each

person's head – that's more than enough to get church trustees squirming in their pews. That kind of wind, that kind of fire – that's the stuff that will change the landscape of a place, and the life of a person.

That Pentecost day in Jerusalem, the coming of the Holy Spirit did change the lives of those believers. And that was the point. God's Spirit blew in to change them, to equip them for what was to come next, and to assure them of God's power fueling them for this holy work. The change was a good thing. The change was a needed thing. But at the same time, the change was a disorienting and confusing thing. Seeing fire dancing above others' heads (could they see their own?). The sound of that powerful wind, that then paled in comparison to the sounds they suddenly found themselves and each other making – speaking in languages they had no reason to know, but that suddenly spoke to those beyond their walls. Which is where the Spirit was sending them. Where church is needed.

Can you imagine the chaos? And who likes chaos? I'll tell you who – God. One of the best seminary takeaways that has served me well (because I have needed it often in transitional work) is this: that chaos is God's best creative medium. It's been a powerful and comforting truth from the very beginning – as in “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters.” That “formless and void” part? In Hebrew, it's Tohu va bohu. The words also translated as chaos. Formlessness. Confusion. Mess. Chaos. And the very next verse? And God said, “Let there be light.” The Spirit is not absent in the midst of change and chaos – it is where creation happens, where renewal, reshaping, reviving happens. Or as the American writer Mason Cooley puts it, in ways in which perhaps some of us can relate – “No chaos – no creation. Evidence: the kitchen at mealtime.”

That Pentecost day, the wind of change blew in, bringing confusion and chaos. Tohu va bohu everywhere. And it was then and there that something new was created. Believers were equipped to share the gospel and to do so beyond their own walls to those who looked and sounded different. In other words, to be the church.

I understand that the winds of change are blowing here at Westminster. Perhaps you may be feeling a bit windblown these days. Like those days in Jerusalem long ago, this is a time between what has already happened and what is not yet clear. Like it did upon those believers long ago, the wind of change blows in and stirs up all kinds of questions and wonderings – what are we called to now, what will be expected, what do we do next, where will it all lead, how long will it take and how will we know? And even if you knew this time would come, now is when you find out how it feels. Feelings of loss, confusion, uncertainty, as well as opportunity and hope all mixed up together – in a tohu va bohu kind of way.

And – that's the good news. The chaos that change brings is a Spirit-filled opportunity. When we aren't quite so stuck in “business as usual,” God can move us and shape us anew. Remember, chaos is God's best creative medium. At creation, when that wind of God moved over the tohu va bohu chaos, God said “Let there be light” and the world was brought into being. On that Pentecost day long ago, when the Spirit blew in and gave new voice and mission to bewildered disciples, God said “Let there be church!” And so now, as the winds of change blow here, as things get stirred up, as questions get asked, as new discoveries and decisions and directions present themselves, as things fall through the cracks, or as people rise to unexpected occasions – in and through it all, take heart. Don't fear the tohu va bohu. Open your minds, your ears, your hearts and listen – for it is the time when God will be saying “Let there be the next faithful chapter of Westminster Presbyterian Church!” Can you imagine it?

Pentecost ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Gracious God, your sacred presence permeates your vast creation. Whether we drill deep within the earth, rocket to a faraway galaxy or peer deeply within ourselves, we cannot flee from your presence. Your spirit is always above us, below us, around us and within us.

We know that your grace and your mercy are ever present. When we are tempted by darkness to live in destructive ways, you whisper words of determination to resist the seduction. When tragedy strikes and we cannot sense your presence, you continue to walk beside us and shoulder part of our agony. Even when we knowingly scamper down the path to hell, you show us an alternative path. God, we give thanks that even when we reject you, you do not spurn us. You are with us always and never cease in seeking the best for us.

Loving God, in the twists and turns of our lives, help us to discern your spirit penetrating our minds,
whispering to our souls
and tugging at our hearts.

You see the best possibilities before us –
the people who can spark joy,
the experiences that can arouse new purpose,
and the opportunities that will revive hope.

May we become more alert and receptive to the call of your Spirit, so that we may embrace the beautiful, joyful, and generous lives you dream for us to live.

And God, may your Spirit constantly infuse us with reminders that
love conquers hate;
light overpowers darkness;
and hope dismantles despair.

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us as we remember the words of Jesus and pray them together as a church family, saying, **“Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen**