

GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Pentecost Year A: Acts 2:1-21
Psalm 104:24-34, 37
John 7:37-39

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Key Passage: *...each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.*
(Acts 2:6b)

I am convinced that Boston is the place where umbrellas go to die. The fierce winds that are so prevalent during rain storms are death on umbrellas. As one who likes to walk to work, I am frequently battling winds. And when I drive and park in our spaces on St. James Street, the wind is another foe. Sometimes I have to push hard against the wind to open my car door, and other times if I don't hold onto the door really tightly, the wind whips it out of my hand, threatening to smash it into Patrick's car beside me. Yikes.

Today is the Feast of Pentecost, one of the highpoints of the liturgical year. And it starts with wind. The disciples are gathered together, following Jesus' command to remain in the city to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit. In earlier verses in Acts, Jesus is taken from them into heaven and they return to Jerusalem, where the community gathers for prayer. Their prayers are offered in trust that God will keep the promises. The one who has defeated death through Jesus is faithful.

Pentecost is originally part of a Jewish festival, Shavuot. The term means "fifty", referring to the fifty days (seven weeks) after Passover, celebrating the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai. Having escaped from slavery in Egypt, the Israelites are now in the wilderness, coming together as a people who are learning to live in covenant with the God who has freed them. The parallel celebration for us as Christians is the coming of the Holy Spirit fifty days after the Easter resurrection. Seeing this parallel with our Jewish brothers and sisters sheds light on our understanding of liberation and new life in community, fundamental to both religious traditions.

The disciples' prayers are interrupted by the rush of violent wind, and they see tongues of fire lighting on their heads. These dramatic signs suggest a disruptive, powerful force being unleashed among them. It reminds us that God's work may be upsetting to our desire for a peaceful, comfortable resolution. We may be surprised at the vigor of God's response to our prayers, unprepared for what may be demanded of us. Perhaps we had been hoping for a "still, small voice." And there are many times when that is in fact God's response to us. But here it is dramatic.

So dramatic that other people notice the commotion. Perhaps the disciples have spilled out into the streets, where people from many nations have gathered for the festival. And then we see the effect of the tongues of fire: the disciples begin to speak in “other tongues.” The wind of God has loosened their tongues and given them inspirational speech. But it is not gibberish, not the scat singing of a jazz musician. It is intelligible to those around them.

The wind and fire of God have overcome the confusion of varying languages. Those hearing are amazed and astonished: “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?” (Acts 2:7-8). Could this be a divine sign of God’s presence? Some cynics are not impressed, “They are filled with new wine.”

But Peter steps forth. In the midst of the commotion, his voice rises up and is heard above the din. This is Peter, who just a few weeks before has been so afraid that he could not even admit to a servant-girl that he knew Jesus. Confident Peter has changed. Forgiven by his risen Lord, he has found a voice, saying words that affirm his trust that Jesus is a fulfillment of ancient prophecy. God is pouring out a divine spirit on all flesh. Young and old, slave and free—all are empowered by God to see through scary times into a future where God awaits.

The swirling winds of power, the flaming tongues of truth—these are the gifts of the Holy Spirit. This is the promise of Pentecost. That those of us who have walked through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are receiving God’s continuing presence, empowered to speak and act boldly about the faithfulness of God. Winds blowing in and through us. Christ’s gift of new life calling us into community, shaping our lives together.

The gifts that each of the disciples receive as their own, the tongues of fire lighting on each of their heads, become powerful instruments for mission. Each is given a gift of speaking in a language foreign to their own. But it is not a gift for private enjoyment. It is a tool for connecting with others, to those with whom a relationship would previously have been blocked by unfamiliar language. And as they exercise these gifts, as they use these strange new tools, hundreds of people are brought together in a common experience. They hear in their own tongue, and they are amazed at the feeling of connection.

As we gather on this Pentecost Sunday, our prayers join with those of the early disciples. They are in transition, and so are we. We pray for God’s wisdom and power. In the midst of trying times, in our country and larger world, in the midst of saying goodbye to our rector and pondering our future, we pray for God’s hand to lead us. We pray for the power that is the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. We ask for wisdom and patience for those stepping forward to lead

our time of discernment. And we pray for ourselves as a community, for the strength and willingness to listen and learn.

The ability to speak and understand across differences is often hard to develop. It requires a willingness to set aside one's own voice as the "correct one" in order to speak a truth that seems foreign. Such humility and patience are gifts from God. Gifts, I believe, that come as the promised presence of the Holy Spirit, blowing like a wind among us. It may feel like a disruptive wind, one that challenges our assumptions and patterns, and one that will bring fresh awareness of God's great love for us, God's desire that we learn to live together.

In his column this past week, New York Times writer David Brooks offers a piercing analysis of the foreign policy we see emerging from our present administration. It is premised, he says, on "selfishness [as] the sole driver of human affairs. It grows out of a worldview that life is a competitive struggle for gain." Brooks acknowledges that people are motivated by desire for gain, for individual status, wealth and power. "But," he says, "they are also motivated by another set of drives—for solidarity, love and moral fulfillment." These drives, he says, "are equally and sometimes more powerful."

Brooks finds that humans "are wired to cooperate" and that we "have a set of universal intuitions that help establish harmony between peoples." As examples of those moral intuitions, he cites these: "rage at injustice, disgust toward greed, reverence for excellence, awe before the sacred, and elevation in the face of goodness." I think that's a pretty good description of the lives that we long to live together as Christians, as members of a community that seeks to follow Jesus.

Pentecost affirms that God's gifts are directed at bringing us together into a human family, a family in which cooperation overcomes selfishness, where we find meaning and purpose in lives that are oriented towards others rather than our own competitive advantage. It is through relationships that we find that differences are cause for affirmation and celebration, not judgment. And where we find our common humanity as we reach across the gaps to hear each other in our individuality and our rootedness.

So as a parish we face into our time of transition with boldness, and with humility. We are asking for God's guidance, for the gifts of discernment and power promised as Jesus' parting words to us. We know that the stirring winds will disturb us at times and will refresh us at others. We ask for the power to hear divergent voices, not in fear of disagreement but in trust of richness and depth of meaning. We ask that God continue to mold us into a community that is learning to live in hope rather than anxiety, and in joy rather than fear.

And what better way to make our prayers visible than in the sacrament of baptism. Today we welcome four children of God into our midst, making promises on their behalf and renewing our own participation in the covenant of respect for the dignity of every human being.

As each child is anointed with water and oil, we affirm that we are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever. These children, their parents and sponsors, and we of the surrounding community will spend a lifetime learning what that means. These four new members will enrich our lives together. We are always blessed as we receive each other as beloved children of God.

Let us continue to claim the promise of the presence of the Holy Spirit in good times and in hours of sorrow, in times of confusion and moments of calm, in times of doubt and in days of decision. In all of these times, we seek God's power and we claim God's promise never to leave us desert us. Come Holy Spirit! Bring us your empowering wind and your fire of truth. Blow in us and through us!