

The Wind That Blows the Doors Off

Acts 2:1-24

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When I was nine years old, my family moved from the hills of East Tennessee to the coast of North Carolina, where we lived until I went to college. The town to which we moved—Wilmington, North Carolina—is known for several wonderful things, including its beaches, its azaleas, and its famous basketball star Michael Jordan. But Wilmington is also known for one other not so great thing: its hurricanes. Because Wilmington lies smack dab in the center of the hurricane alley that runs up the east coast from Jacksonville, Florida, to the Jersey shore, it frequently receives the brunt of the storms that hit the coast during the fall of the year.

When my family moved to Wilmington in September of 1960, none of us had ever before witnessed a hurricane. So we were caught totally off guard when, after being in our new home only a few days, a hurricane literally blew through our front yard. I remember crouching there in the living room with my parents and brothers as dusk gave way to night that evening, noses pressed to the window panes, watching those tall, tall pine and live oak trees in our front yard sway to and fro, accompanied by the sounds of pouring rain, howling winds, and the cracking of tree limbs.

At the time, we children were too young and too naïve to be scared. We were absolutely intrigued with this amazing feat of nature, and delighted to be able to stay up long into the night, experiencing the most exciting thing that had happened since the move.

But my parents were not so young or naïve. Indeed, they and my grandmother—who had moved with us from Tennessee and who (though with us during the storm) lived about a mile from our house in a mobile home—were worried throughout the night about her home and whether or not it had survived the storm. So when dawn finally broke, and the storm seemed to subside, my father (because the roads were impassable by car) walked the distance to my grandmother's mobile home in order to check on it for her. Amazingly and thankfully, her mobile home survived intact.

What we didn't fully realize at the time was the danger my father placed himself in by going to my grandmother's house. Not only did he risk electrocution, walking through downed power lines in knee-deep water. He also made it back home just in time for the storm to resume its fury. For unbeknown to any of us hurricane rookies, the storm was not over when my dad walked to my grandmother's house. We were sitting smack dab in the middle of its eye.

Disciples in the Eye of the Storm

In our Scripture reading from Acts this morning, the disciples, unbeknown to anyone but God, were sitting smack dab in the eye of a storm. For weeks they had watched as the turmoil and anger swirling around their beloved rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, intensified, finally erupting into a mean and fearsome hurricane, bent on his destruction. This storm, in fact, had resulted in death.

But then had come the Easter calm. And for fifty days now the disciples had been

living in its eye: calmed by the reports of the women that death had not conquered or silenced Jesus, but that God had raised him from the dead; calmed by Jesus' own mysterious risen presence with them as he interpreted the scriptures to them on the Emmaus road and as he ate bread and fish with them by the sea; calmed by Jesus' promise, as he was ascending into heaven, that God would not abandon them, but would clothe them with power from on high.

It was in the midst of this post-Easter calm that the disciples gathered in a small house in Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish festival of Pentecost. Huddled together, they found strength in each other's presence as they remembered Jesus and all he had taught them. Huddled together, they hoped against hope that the worst of the storm was at last over, and that they could get back to their ordinary lives of fishing and caring for their families. Huddled together, they tried to figure out what life was going to be like without the presence of their risen Lord with them.

The Pentecost Storm

But just when they thought it was all over, that the storm had finally subsided, it happened. Unexpected. Unanticipated. Unannounced. Wind, out of nowhere, blowing through the house with a howling force, upending everything in its path. Swirling and circling the room like someone possessed in a frenzied dance.

But this wind not only upended loose objects. This wild Spirit wind of God also toppled all human understandings of who is in and who is out, who is clean and who is unclean, who is worthy to proclaim the Gospel and who is not. Because of this wind, people from nations who didn't share the same language—some of whom were at enmity with one another—began hearing from one another the Good News of Christ, and were united in a way that transcended geography and worldly political alliances. Because of this wind, slaves—previously forbidden to speak before they were spoken to—boldly proclaimed to their masters the liberating Word they had received from Jesus, the Christ. Because of this wind, women—long denied the right to interpret the scriptures in public worship—began to preach and prophesy in such powerful ways that their husbands and sons and fathers could only stare at them in gape-mouthed wonder. Because of this wind, old men who thought their days of dreaming were long over, and young men who thought their lives were already too locked in for any more dreaming, began to dream dreams and see new visions for how they might live their lives differently for God. Because of this wind, people who were not disciples at all—onlookers who simply gathered on the porches of the house to see what all the ruckus was about—listened to Peter's sermon, repented of their sins, and decided that they, too, wanted to become disciples of Jesus. And because of this wind, everyone in that room who thought they had God all figured out and safely circumscribed in their neat and orderly theological boxes, saw the doors of those boxes completely blown off.

For at Pentecost, God proclaimed through a wild and unruly wind: "I am Spirit. I am who I am, and I blow where I will blow. And no one and no thing can limit, contain, control, or predict who I will welcome, where I will alight, or what I will upend in this world."

Nervous about the Spirit

And frankly, it is that very unruliness, that very unpredictability that makes us Presbyterian types so nervous about the Holy Spirit. We can't control it, any more than

we can control a hurricane. And for people who love to have things done decently and in order, that is a very disconcerting tendency.

Several years ago a pastor friend of mine sent me a joke via email. It seems that the three persons of the Trinity were making vacation plans and discussing amongst themselves where they would go.

"I think I'll go visit the Canadian Rockies this year," said God the Creator. I haven't been there in awhile, and I'd like to revisit that wonder of my creation."

"I'm going back to the land of my birth this year," said Jesus. "There's been a lot of trouble there recently, and I'd like to go and see for myself how things are going."

"Well," announced the Holy Spirit, "I've decided that this year I want to spend my vacation in a place where I've never been before. That's why I'm planning to spend my entire summer vacation visiting Presbyterian churches!"

We chuckle upon hearing that joke, but in part it's a nervous chuckle, because we know that we Presbyterian types—despite all our creedal affirmations that we believe in God the Holy Spirit—are a bit antsy when it comes to this third person of the Trinity. Yes, we devote a day to Pentecost in the Christian Year, and we decorate our sanctuaries with red, and we sing Spirit hymns with gusto. But for some of us, a day is about all we want to give to the Holy Spirit. Give it any more space, and this wild, unruly wind of God might get out of control.

Will Willimon, the United Methodist Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, reminds us that Presbyterians are not alone in this regard. In an article published in *Journal for Preachers*, Willimon recounts how a layperson—a professor of chemistry at Duke University—asked him on the way out of Duke Chapel one Sunday morning, why it is that Willimon himself rarely speaks about the Holy Spirit in his sermons at Duke. Willimon responds in a highly tongue-in-cheek way with these words, addressed to pastors:

I will tell you, dear fellow preachers, what I could not tell him . . . The risks and pitfalls of working with the Holy Spirit are so great that it is better in our preaching, to work alone! It is better not to pray the "prayer for Illumination," . . . for this petition . . . is an invitation to trouble. The Holy Spirit, in my dealings with him, or her, tends to be pushy, assertive, antagonistic and imperialistic. It is the nature of the Holy Spirit to want to take over wherever he, or she, intrudes. The Holy Spirit seems to abhor a vacuum. . . [That is why] we need to keep all of the empty spaces [in worship] filled—keep talking, keep people going through the motions, keep their noses in the bulletins—in order that there be a minimum of open space, gaps, or "dead air," as people in television put it. Such gaps and spaces are but invitations for the Holy Spirit to push into our liturgy. . . I have seen otherwise contained and cautious congregations get loose, lurch to the left, even begin to shout, stamp their feet, and throw all caution to the wind at the instigation of the Holy Spirit. I do not have to tell you experienced pastors why this sort of thing is to be avoided. Control is one of the chief functions of clergy. And the Holy Spirit likes nothing better than to take a perfectly decent and decorous Service of Worship and transform it into some sort of heart-happy out of control hootenanny. If congregations cannot trust their pastors to protect them from the Holy Spirit, whom can they trust?¹

I recently got reacquainted with my own ambiguous feeling about the Holy Spirit while I was getting my hair cut. Over the years that I have been going to see her, Robin, my hairdresser, and I have conversed about a variety of things, including matters of faith. Robin and her family are very involved in an Assembly of God congregation, and on this particular day Robin was excitedly telling me about a guest preacher she had heard at her church the previous week, and what he had meant to her family.

She told how this man had the gift of healing, and had healed a number of people who went to him for the laying on of hands. She told how this man had the gift of discernment, and had told her that God's hand was upon her oldest daughter in a special way. And she told me about the various people—including her own children—who were "slain in the spirit" during the service, possessed by a force larger than themselves, as this man proclaimed—evidently in a very powerful and moving way—the good news of the Gospel.

At one point Robin, knowing that I had been a Presbyterian seminary professor, stood back, looked at me and said, "You know, I don't even know whether you believe in this stuff or not." I responded rather vaguely, "Oh sure." But inside I wrestled anew with my all too ambivalent feelings about the Holy Spirit. What do I think about a Spirit that upends all our carefully thought out views of God, Christ, and the church? What do I think about a Spirit that upends every understanding we humans construct of insiders and outsiders, of clean and unclean, of who is of the Spirit and who isn't? What do I think of a Spirit that seems to favor stirring things up over letting them lie peacefully?

The Trouble with the Spirit

The trouble with the Spirit, you see, is that if you open the window a crack to let it in, it might literally blow the doors off. Willimon's right on that count. The Spirit we observe at the first Pentecost is wild, assertive, and pushy, upending everything that lies in its path. It can turn your life upside down; it can turn your local congregation upside down; it can turn the world upside down.

But what Willimon's language does not adequately capture—at least not for me—is that this Spirit is also the Spirit of Christ. Yes, the Spirit turns things upside down. But that's because, like Jesus, it aims to set things right. (After all, didn't Jesus promise that one day the first would be last, and the last first?) Yes, the Spirit breaks down walls. But that's because, like Jesus, it aims to unite. (After all, didn't Jesus promise us that one day he would make of all nations on earth one people, who love and serve God?) And yes, the Spirit does blow the doors off of our prior understandings of God. But that's because our theologies—no matter how sophisticated and well thought through—are always too narrow, too confined, too circumscribed to ever hold the fullness of our wild and wonderfully free-Spirited God.

A Church in Need of the Spirit

These are difficult times in the life of our denomination, and indeed, in the life of local congregations. For in recent years, many of us have been caught up in the winds of change that are shaking up our culture and challenging our churches. The cultural disestablishment of the church from the place of honor it once held in the fifties has meant that congregations are losing members, are struggling to survive financially, and are increasingly competing on Sunday morning for the attention of parishioners

who have to decide whether soccer games, a day of rest with their families, or going to worship will be their top priority. The changing roles and expectations of ministry have meant that many pastors are disheartened that they spend far more time during an average day dealing with petty administrative matters than they spend on the pastoral call of soul-tending to which they first felt drawn. The decline in clergy available to serve smaller congregations has left many churches wondering who, in their future, will preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments in their midst. And, of course, the constant battling within the church over the very nature of the church itself—who we will ordain, what our core theological beliefs are, and what the church’s central mission will be in the twenty-first century—have left gaping wounds of division that cause some to think a permanent split may be the only way into the future.

In the midst of all of these tumultuous hurricane-force winds of change, I sense a growing desire among a number of church folk to find that “eye” in the midst of the storm, that central place of respite where we can gather with our own kind, huddle together in support and solidarity, and bolt the doors and lock the windows lest any more troubling changes blow us completely away. Some are even posting sentinels at the doors, checking to see that the theological credentials of any who seek entry are “orthodox” enough before allowing them entry, or are circulating petitions that spell out what “true believers” must affirm before they’re allowed admission. And others dream wistfully of returning the church to those good old days when Jesus was truly with us, when life had a clearer meaning and purpose, and when we were not having to make our own way amidst the debris left from the hurricanes in whose wake we dwell.

Frankly, it is only natural that we should long for such peace, such stability, such homogeneity in times such as this. As one member of my own congregation—a very thoughtful and involved layman—said to me after we had both attended a church school forum on worship and multiculturalism: “I chose this church because there were people like me here, music I liked, and a homogeneity that made me feel at home. Why now do I have to worry about how to make the church a welcoming place for all these other types? Don’t they have their own churches to attend?”

The answer to his question, of course, is complex, as complex as Pentecost itself. For on the birth day of the Christian Church, the Spirit of God blew open all the locked doors and bolted windows in the room where those disciples huddled together with their inner circle, and revealed God’s will to create a church that was bigger, broader, more inclusive, and more open than any in the room had ever imagined. Into that room blew new converts whose budding theologies must have surely shaken the status quo beliefs of those disciples—just as did Jesus’ own unorthodox teachings. Into that room blew tongues that rested on people the disciples—left purely to their own devices—would never have imagined worthy of carrying on Jesus’ ministry: women, children, slaves, and gentiles from all nations on earth. And into that room blew a mighty wind through which God announced boldly and powerfully: “You ain’t seen nothing yet, disciples! Just look at the church I’m going to create! Just look at the community I intend to gather in my name. And just look at the power I’m going to bestow upon ALL believers, so that the Gospel—my glorious, world-upending gospel—can be carried into the uttermost reaches of the earth.”

The Witness of Harry Emerson Fosdick

This past year I have been involved with five other scholars in writing a history of the Riverside Church in New York City, that great gothic, Protestant cathedral that sits on a hill overlooking the Hudson River. Consequently, I have spent a good many hours in the ninth floor archives of that church, reading and listening to the sermons of its five outstanding senior ministers, in order to write my chapter on Riverside's preaching and worship history.

Most intriguing to me has been the opportunity to get acquainted, through his sermons, with Harry Emerson Fosdick, the founding pastor of The Riverside Church. While some theologians deemed Fosdick to be a heretic of the worst order, Fosdick was also known and beloved by thousands of people all over the world because of his warm, pastoral spirit, his excellent sermons that were broadcast each Sunday over the radio, and the fifty books he wrote on a variety of devotional topics. The thing that has most drawn me to Fosdick is the way in which his own fearless openness to the Spirit—and to the Spirit's transformative winds—gave rise to a vision for a church that was intentionally founded to be, like the Pentecost gathering, ecumenical, international, and interracial.

Fosdick's primary concern was not to batten down the hatches of the church to insure that only those who are pure and holy and orthodox in their faith and "like us" can participate. Rather, Fosdick flung the doors wide open, welcoming all, embracing all, no matter where they were on their faith pilgrimage. He dreamed of a church where people in honesty could engage the intellectual forces of their time in dialogue with the Christian faith, where people could voice their own doubts and explore various perspectives on faith without immediately being labeled "heretical," where members of other denominations would be embraced as full members and partners in global discipleship. A church that would reflect—in its very makeup—the multicultural, multiracial vision of that first Pentecost Day.

Even more amazingly, that is the church that Fosdick and the Riversiders have built. If you worship at Riverside these days—a church that now has an African American, James Forbes, as its senior minister—I imagine that you will be moved, like I am, by the sea of faces you see there: a sea that looked for all the world like a gathering of the United Nations.

Church as Open Circle Dance: A Pentecost Image

I believe that Pentecost shakes us out of the illusion that we as church can ever dwell for very long with our own kind in the eye of the storms that swirl around us. God's desire today—as on that first Pentecost Day—is to blow into our midst, upending our preconceived understandings of insiders and outsiders and even of God's very own self, creating a church that by its inclusivity, its power, and its joy in the Gospel draws toward its open doors and windows all sorts of folk who long to hear Christ's liberating message.

My own image of that church is best captured in a serigraph, painted by a California artist named John August Swanson, that hangs over the mantel in our living room in New Jersey. The painting, entitled "Celebration," depicts a room in which men, women, and children are gathered, dressed in long multi-colored robes, and dancing a circle dance (which I like to imagine as the dance of faith) to the accompaniment of lutes, harps, and other instruments. Their faces reflect the artist's

own cultural heritage—a blend of Mexican and Swedish!—but their iconic features clearly suggest that they could be anyone from anywhere. Their robes are multicolored—blues, greens, purples, roses, golds—colors the artist painstakingly created through fifty separate screens of color. Behind the dancers, the arched doors and windows of the room in which they celebrate are thrown completely open, so that the music and dancing of the room wafts out into the night air. And in the distance, through the open windows, other would-be dancers are traveling over hill and vale through the starry night with their own lit candles, eager to join this circle dance of faith.

Somehow, that is how I picture Pentecost after God's hurricane Holy Spirit wind blew through. Rather than creating chaos, this upending wind of God created a community more inclusive, more loving, more outreaching than any would have imagined. Rather than promoting withdrawal and isolation, these dancing flames lit fires of faith, hope, and love in the hearts of believers, fires that also drew countless others to the warmth and light of their presence. And rather than creating fear, the Spirit of God created such liberating joy on Pentecost, that peoples from all over the earth came to join in the dance, lifting their own voices to sing the Gospel song that proclaimed their glorious liberty as children of God.

Personally, I want a church like that. A church like the vibrant, celebrating community in Swanson's painting. A church that, like The Riverside Church, looks more like the United Nations than like me. A church that, like the church formed on that first Pentecost Day, is ever open to God's transforming, upending, renewing winds, and that commits itself to continue God's liberating proclamation in this broken world of ours.

To commit ourselves to being such a church is risky, because once you let the Spirit blow through, there's no telling what will be upended. But frankly, I think it's time we threw wide the doors and windows and took the risk. Trusting that the Spirit is indeed Christ's Spirit, and that the upending is for good, not ill.

So Come, Holy Spirit. Come. Come and blow the doors off.

Note

¹ William H. Willimon, "Overcoming Pentecost in Our Preaching: Proclamation Without Spirit," *Journal for Preachers* 24 (Pentecost 2001), 31.