

Pentecost A 2023 Acts 2:1-21

The other day a few of us were talking about the dreams we have when we're anxious: it's the end of the semester and you realize you haven't been to any classes or turned in any assignments, that sort of thing. I have a couple recurring dreams like that, but the one that wakes me up in a cold sweat from a dead sleep is tornadoes. I've never been in a tornado, just seen them on TV and helped clean up the aftermath: uprooted trees and leveled buildings. It's incredible how the wind—something we can't even really see—can completely change a landscape. But it's not just the extreme winds of a tornado or hurricane that can do that. If you've ever been out West you've seen how, over time, even gentle wind blowing sand can create incredibly beautiful, surreal rock formations. If I'm going to be anxious about something, in all likelihood, it is the ravages of time that'll get me, yet I still have those scary dreams about tornadoes. On Pentecost, Luke describes the coming of the Spirit “like the rush of a violent wind” but John's gospel says that the disciples received the Spirit with the gentleness of Jesus' breath. The movement of the Spirit may be sudden and dramatic or quiet and persistent, but the result of either is drastic transformation, for us and for the world.

Long before Pentecost became a Christian holiday commemorating the windy, fiery appearance of God's Spirit, Pentecost was a Jewish festival, 50 days after Passover as the name indicates, celebrating God giving the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai. It was for that reason—to remember God entering into relationship with people in a new way—that Jewish pilgrims from all the hard-to-pronounce places in the known world were gathered in Jerusalem. Jesus' disciples were staying in Jerusalem as well; they hadn't made it very far since Jesus' resurrection. Luke seems to describe them staying in the same house that whole time, which makes sense, since Jesus kept appearing to them there. When he ascended, he told them they would receive power from the Spirit so that they could be his witnesses to the ends of the earth; so they stay together, in constant prayer, anticipating being empowered by Spirit.

You can wait until next week to see how close I stray to heresy territory trying to preach about the Holy Trinity, but for now let's at least not think of Pentecost as *the one place* on the cosmic timeline of history when God's Spirit arrived. Remember that the Spirit—the wind from God—was present from the very beginning, moving through the dark void and over the waters of chaos, enlivening the genesis of creation. God's creatures never lived without God, so the disciples weren't really alone while they were waiting here. Although it's not as dramatic as the windstorm in Acts, John's gospel describes Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit on the disciples while they are locked in the house, on the evening following the resurrection, and then appearing to them again because Thomas was absent during his first visit. So we have a gospel story of the disciples encountering God's Spirit before Pentecost; it wasn't *the day* when God

finally decided to be present with the disciples. But as opposed to the often subtle movement of the Spirit, Pentecost was one of many times the Spirit worked in dramatic fashion—when God’s presence was too phenomenal to miss.

The power the disciples receive from the Spirit on Pentecost helps them do exactly what Jesus had promised they would do: be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. They are miraculously able to speak in all the native languages of the foreign visitors in Jerusalem. So once the Parthians, Medes, Egyptians, and so on hear the disciples talk about Jesus, they can go home and repeat the gospel to their respective communities. Wind, flame, and speaking in foreign languages: that’s the big, flashy Pentecost moment. But even in that story we can see that the Spirit worked in more discreet ways as well: in Peter, who had denied even knowing Jesus, becoming the chief spokesman for the new Jesus movement. Really the Spirit accomplishes a quiet but remarkable transition in all the disciples as they go from hiding in fear during the crucifixion and dismissing the women’s report of the resurrection as “an idle tale” to announcing to the whole known world what God has done through Jesus. Did the disciples’ transformation come from the sudden inspiration on Pentecost or the fifty days of quiet encounters with the risen Jesus? What is to say it’s not both?

Whether we think of their transformation being sudden or gradual, dramatic or subtle, the Spirit does change Jesus’ followers. In fact, Luke, who in his first book most often called the twelve “disciples”—because they were disciplining themselves after Jesus, changes his terminology in Acts to almost always call that group of Jesus’ first followers “apostles”—that is *messengers*. The power the Spirit gives them allows them to do the work of evangelism, sharing the message of the good news of Jesus. Even their ability to speak in foreign languages wasn’t a fun party trick—it was for the very practical purpose of spreading the message of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection in a way that the whole world could literally understand it. The gifts the Spirit imparts are always for the work of the kingdom, for the common good, as the letter to the Corinthians reminds us.

We may get to experience a few Pentecost moments ourselves over the years—times when we can point to the fiery, dazzling work of the Spirit. But when God speaks in the still, small voice, when the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words, when Jesus imparts peace as gently as a breath—those moments can change us just as profoundly. The landscape can undergo as drastic a transformation from years of patient wind erosion as it can from the swift ferocity of a tornado. Whichever way the Spirit is at work in us, God is empowering us to live more deeply into abundant life; and the abundant life that God intends is life that is lived for the good of all people. May we go boldly, trusting that the Spirit strengthens and equips us to tell the good news and to do the work God calls us to do.