

May 24 – Pentecost

Scripture: Acts 2:1-21

Sermon: A Mighty Wind

The story of Pentecost is one of those occasions in the Bible that is hard for us to wrap our minds around. Luke, in writing about it, used word pictures to try and help his readers grasp the power and uniqueness of this event. Nothing like this had ever happened before and never again, in quite this way, will it occur. We hear these word pictures, a mighty wind and tongues of flames and wonder what really happened in that room in Jerusalem. We don't know. We do know the results. The disciples were given, for a time, the ability to speak in other languages. This is different from speaking in tongues or the prayer languages that people claim today. It was different from what is recorded in the rest of the Acts of the Apostles when it talks about people speaking in tongues. This time the disciples could speak in all of the known languages of the countries surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. Many Jews and God fearers were in Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost. It was and is first a Jewish holy day. Because of this outpouring of the Spirit all could hear the good news in their own language. The disciples were changed forever by this event. Beforehand we find them hiding behind closed doors. Afterwards they stand with Peter as he proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ. Before long some will die a martyr's death and the rest will travel their known world boldly sharing the faith. They will undergo persecution and imprisonment. All but the Apostle John will die as martyrs for the faith. The greatest miracle, to my mind, of the Pentecost story is not the coming of the Spirit or the speaking in tongues but the change in the lives of the disciples. God's Spirit when it comes to us always has this life altering effect on us.

I have been leading two weekly reflection groups using a study by Brian McLaren. He notes that there are many words for the Holy Spirit contained in the Bible. Again, these are word pictures to describe what is happening in these people's lives at the moment and how they are changed. McLaren mentions, among others, wind, breath, fire, cloud and a dove. Today I want us to think about how the Holy Spirit moves

in our lives and the life of the church using those images. Let us see what they have to tell us about how God comes to us and changes us.

We begin with **Wind**: Many times the writers of the Bible use this word to describe the actions of God. The wind blew across the waters in creation to create the dry land. Again after forty days of rain in the story of Noah we hear God caused a wind to blow across the waters of the flood so the dry land appeared. And when Jesus was in a boat on the Sea of Galilee and a storm arose he silenced the wind and all were in awe that the wind and sea obeyed him. On Pentecost we hear that the Spirit came upon the disciples with the sound of a mighty wind. When we think of our experiences of wind we know it can be beneficial, such as a summer breeze cools us. We also see its destructive power in tornados or hurricanes. Sometimes we talk about wind as being a cleansing force and we know this happens when the wind takes our leaves and blows them into our neighbor's yard! The Bible connects wind with the power of the Holy Spirit. This tells me that sometimes we experience the Holy Spirit as God blessing us, sometimes shaking things up in our lives and as at Pentecost blowing us in a new direction. In what ways do we need to be open to the power of the Spirit blowing in our lives? Where do we need blessings and where do we need challenges?

Breath: is another image for the Spirit of God. We find a couple of examples of where the Bible sees breath as the power and Spirit of God. Adam was formed by God but did not have life until the breath of God was blown into him. Ezekiel had a vision of the valley of dry bones. They come together and have flesh come upon the bones but do not live until the breath of God blows across and into them. This makes me ask the question, "Where are we feeling dead and lifeless?" All of us have those moments when today feels lifeless and tomorrow seems hopeless. God wants to blow into our lives a message of hope and life and remind us that we are offered life, full and abundant even at these moments.

Fire: is also a way the Bible describes God's Spirit among us. Moses sees a bush burning but not consumed and when he approaches it hears the voice of God. Today we heard of tongues of fire resting on those in the room as a sign of being filled with the Holy Spirit. Like wind I want us to think of some of the ways we experience fire.

Fire has positive images associated with it such as a purifying force that gets rid of the dross. It tempers making the metal stronger. Also, it can cause things to blend. When discordant elements reach their melting point they can be combined such as sugar, butter and chocolate in a recipe. All of these images speak to me of what God wants to do in our lives and the lives of the disciples at Pentecost. Pentecost was a purifying time. We can assume that all of the disciples had some guilt and shame about how they had acted in the last days of Jesus' life, Peter most of all. This might have been one of the reasons they were afraid and silent. The power of the Spirit brought with it an awareness that they were forgiven, purified. It was also a tempering fire as they became strong enough to face anything. Fear was replaced by strength. Pentecost was also a time of unity coming out of disunity. Many remark how Pentecost is the reversal of the tower of Babel. There, God caused the people to speak in many languages. Where there was unity now chaos reigned. With the disciples speaking the same message but in many languages all could hear and understand the good news. There was a new sense of unity. We need to ask ourselves where do we need this purifying fire reminding us God loves and forgives us? Where do we need to be strengthened because fear has silenced us? And where do we need the power to work for unity, to break down barriers between us and others? The Spirit that comes as fire will do this in our lives.

Cloud is not always an image we associate with God's Spirit. But as I reflected on this image I recall how a cloud covered Mount Sinai when Moses went up it to receive the Ten Commandments. We hear the voice of God comes out of a cloud at Jesus' baptism and later on the mount of Transfiguration. Both times this voice shares the news that Jesus was God's beloved. Thinking of those images a cloud becomes a symbol of the nearness of God and the love of God. When we are feeling very alone or that God does not hear or at least respond to our needs we need to look and see a cloud and its reminder that God's Spirit surrounds us. When we are feeling uncared about again a cloud can remind us that God too calls us God's beloved. A cloud image is a comforting and reassuring form of the Spirit that blows into our lives. It won't shake us up and point us in new directions but will remind us that we are not alone and we have the tools to handle this present moment.

Dove is our last symbol. It was a dove that came back to Noah bearing an olive branch after the flood to say the dry land had appeared. This is not exactly a sign of the Spirit of God but a reminder that God is offering life when all we feel is chaos and death. In some of the stories of Jesus' baptism we have a dove descending upon him. It is a word picture of how God's Spirit came in a new and empowering way into Jesus' life. What we forget is what some of those same accounts tell us occurs just after Jesus' baptism. It says the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. So the dove, like the wind and flames is a symbol of God's Spirit coming to us but also a reminder that God expects us to listen, to be willing to change and move in new directions because of that gift. When we have gotten a little too comfortable in our lives we need to pray for this gift of the Spirit that comes to us, blesses us and challenges us, for this is how we grow.

The Dove has also become an image for peace. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers." So it is also a symbol of where we need to be agents of reconciliation, where we need to be willing to forgive and forget, and where we need to work and stand against forces that challenge peace, knowing God's spirit will help us.

Luke did his best to describe the powerful encounter the disciples had with the Holy Spirit. Whether it was a wind, fire, breath or more it changed their lives forever. This is what the Spirit wants to do for all of us. Do we this day have the courage to pray "Come Holy Spirit?" If we do we know we will be changed, blessed, renewed and challenged.