

Pentecost B
May 20, 2018
St. John' Cathedral

Just before Thanksgiving a couple of years ago I remember wondering one windy afternoon if my neighbor's Ponderosa Pine (swaying in a high wind), was going to fall on my house and demolish the kitchen. Fortunately it didn't, but by the next morning my back fence was on the ground and fallen trees littered our street. The power was out for about a week. A gentle breeze had turned into a fierce and windstorm, the force of which surprised us all.

Sometimes we forget about the power of wind, but today is a good time to remember it as we hear again the story of the first Pentecost. A story of wind and fire, and of a variety of languages, spoken and unexplainably understood by all who gathered. A story of the power of the Holy Spirit, unleashed on a young church just beginning to find its way in the world. The early Christian believers being launched on an incredible mission.

They had been waiting for that day, but were unsure of what it would hold. Jesus, after his resurrection, had appeared to the disciples in a variety of places, assuring them that he was alive and with them, although in a different way. Then he left them -- ascending to heaven, leaving them with the responsibility of carrying on what he had begun: A mission of healing and wholeness – of sharing good news with all who longed to receive it. (A friend in a former parish once said that Jesus, when he ascended, 'went into the everywhere' – no longer physically present, but with us in a new way – and everywhere.)

But he had also promised that the Spirit would come – an advocate, as we heard in today’s gospel. One who would stand with us, speak on our behalf. One who would strengthen us and energize us. One who would guide us into truth, and into action.

And so on that day the disciples gathered. And then came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, filling the house where they were. They saw something like tongues of fire resting on one another. And then came the sound of many languages from an assortment of regions and nations – a babble that was understood by all who listened. It was so astonishing that some thought they were simply drunk.

But they were not. They were experiencing the power of God. Specifically, the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is an exotic story. A unique story. And it is our story. A story of strength and power experienced in a new way.

And it is also a story for us today – not so much in trying to duplicate the experience, but to receive it and learn from it. To expect the Spirit to continue to be in our midst in ways that we need deeply.

It’s interesting that the Pentecost story is paired today with the story from the prophet Ezekiel of the dry bones – a story we sometimes hear during Lent or at the Easter Vigil.

It is a story set in a time of exile in Babylon—a desolate time in the life of the people of Israel. Jerusalem and its temple had been destroyed, the people scattered. When I think about this, sometimes the news footage we see from the current refugee crises in many parts of the world comes to mind. Dusty, deserted cities.

People wandering far from home, devastated and displaced. It was the depth of despair.

But this is also a story of new life and new energy -- a story of transformation emerging from a huge collection of dry, sun-baked bones in a desolate valley. This, too, is a story with wind (or at least breath) at its center. God asks the prophet, "Can these bones live?" and then tells him to prophesy – and mysteriously, the bones come together. Then the prophet was told to call forth breath from the four winds – and the bones came to life. (The Hebrew word *ruah* that means breath or wind occurs ten times in these fourteen verses.)

What are we to make of all of this? Fire, wind and language on the day of Pentecost. Dry bones in a desolate valley coming to life. We don't always think about God like this. A God of power and strength – unbridled energy that energizes and empowers us. Brings us new life. Surprises us. Helps us to come together rather than be separated by language or culture. If we think of our God only as gentle, mild, comfortable, we need to think anew.

The essayist Annie Dillard in a piece called "Expedition to the Pole," captures some of that often understated and underestimated power of God. She writes: "The churches are children laying on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews."

(Maybe this is the point at which I urge you to make sure your seat belts are fastened and worn tightly across your laps.)

Do we expect this of God? Do we relish the idea of the energy, the unity, the healing, the hope that come from these stories that are part of our family album of faith? These are stories of movement – of change – of new life fueled by the relentless energy of God.

I'm sure every period of history has its challenges. Maybe the challenges of our times are not unique. But they are real and urgent. How will we open our hearts to the homeless? How will we embrace the stranger? How will we move toward reconciliation locally and globally? How will we feed the hungry and comfort the sorrowful? How will we address the repetitive horror of school shootings? How will we be brave enough to be bold as we embrace these challenges?

These are “God questions. Spirit questions. Questions that beg for a mighty wind and tongues of fire – power and confidence.

Tom Shaw, the late bishop of Massachusetts, reminded people in his diocese that the men and women who had walked with Jesus in his earthly ministry understood at Pentecost that this power to heal the brokenness of the world was theirs through the Holy Spirit. It was this gift that gave them the courage to embrace the brokenness of the world and a vision to see the possibility of God's healing power everywhere in the world.

Out of this insight came Bishop Shaw's prayer – to ask God to open us to the power of the Holy Spirit as God renews that Spirit within us. That God give us a bold vision of God's healing in the world. That God make us bold healers. That God

would banish cynicism, despair, hopelessness and apathy within us that we might see the restoring hand of God in the darkest places.

Today on this Spirit-centered feast of Pentecost we also celebrate our graduating high school seniors and send them off with our blessings and prayers for whatever their future holds. Today is a time that we can also send them off with a dose of hope and the assurance of God's presence in their lives. A dose of expectation that in their lives that relentless, creative energy of God will challenge and direct them. A reminder that as we are all called to be servants of God in whatever place we find ourselves. A puff of wind. A flash of fire. A sense of life and connection.

Bishop Shaw's prayer is for all of us, a prayer to change the world. May it open us to the energy of the Spirit of that first Pentecost to bind us together and to equip us to serve the world in these times of great challenge and even greater opportunity.