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Acts 2:1-21

Pr. Andrew Plocher

This is the real beginning of the Pentecost story: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was without form and void; and darkness covered the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.” (Genesis 1:1) The word for spirit in the Hebrew is “ruach.” The same word can also be translated as “mighty wind.” Some of our contemporary translations say, “A wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” It is to say the same thing. The Holy Spirit is a mighty wind that moves across the dark chaos that had settled in, pushes it aside, and creates life in its place.

Later in the Old Testament, that same wind appears again blowing across the Red Sea, splitting it in half, and making a way for the Hebrews to leave slavery. Then they begin the journey to a new life in the Promised Land. Much later, the mighty wind reappears rushing across Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones, bringing them back to life with God’s breath.

On the day of Pentecost, the disciples were huddled together in the sanctuary of their upper room, and suddenly a violent wind from heaven appeared—inside the house. Don’t you think these good Hebrews knew something was up? They had heard all of the biblical stories about the great Ruach wind called Spirit. They knew about creation, the Red Sea, and Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones being brought back to life. So when all of a sudden they were being tossed around by a powerful wind, they knew that God was at work with the gift of life.

The question is, do you know that? When the winds of change sweep through your family, your community, your life, do you know what it means? When your safe plans are blown out the door, and when you are forced to move into a strange future that you had not planned, do you realize that this may be the Spirit of God who insists on leading you to a new life?

The world can be a harsh place. It pushes us around all the time with relentless schedules and pressing demands. Like the first disciples who nestled together in their familiar upper room, we, too, look for places of sanctuary. Somewhere where we are safe, where we can let down our guard, and where we can find refuge in the familiar and predictable. Perhaps home is that sanctuary for you. After an exhausting day of

work surrounded by wolves and snakes, it feels good to come home where you don't have to be defended and can shut the door on your problems. Or perhaps church is your sanctuary where you are free to rest your weary soul and find inspiration in music and carefully spoken words. Or maybe you thought that Jesus would keep you safe. After all, isn't that why we call him Savior? No, Jesus isn't really that interested in keeping us safe.

The last words the risen Christ spoke to the disciples before he ascended into heaven were to promise that the Holy Ruach of God would come upon them. Then they would have the power to fulfill their mission in life. And ten days later, at Pentecost, as the disciples were hiding in their safe upper room, the wind rushed down upon them and blew them out of their sanctuary into the waiting world.

Sanctuaries are good places. We need them to find rest and the renewal of vision. But whenever we use our safe place to resist change, the sanctuary becomes a tomb. Things that do not change are dead, including our lives. But you can stop living long before you die. All you have to do is to retreat into how it used to be. But your retreat is then a tomb. Jesus doesn't care much for tombs. He didn't even stay in his own for long, so don't expect to find him in yours. Expect him to send his Spirit to breathe life back into you by pushing you to a new place where you can only live by faith, which is the only way to be fully alive.

The word Pentecost simply means fifty days after Passover. On this day the Jews were celebrating the Festival of Weeks, or as it was also called, the Festival of Harvest. It was supposed to be a time of remembering God's faithfulness in providing the winter crops. Year after year, century after century, the people perfunctorily went through the motions of giving thanks to the God who provides.

In many ways, the last 15 months have been a challenge for all of us. We have lost loved ones, wrestled with disease and dis-ease, and had the rhythms of our lives uprooted. The sanctuaries of our homes, exiled from the sanctuaries of coffee shops and common spaces, quickly felt confining. Spaces that had pronounced our freedom also defined our confinement.

And we have not been together in this sanctuary – this space and place – in as long a time. The rhythms of years of worship, decades, that had felt perfunctory in so many ways, were now longed for. Yearned for in new ways. What we'd taken for granted couldn't be.

Our nation's leadership has tried, and so have we, to be safe. The cases are below 30,000 for the first time in nearly a year. Yet nearly 590,000 people have died from COVID. Many of them sought safety and tried to stay protected. Essential workers of all stripes and jobs, loved ones, faced illness, trauma, and death. They sacrificed their safety out of care for others. None of them were permitted the luxury of staying in a safe place.

As we approach Memorial Day, I'm reminded of an inscription on the Lincoln Memorial, "Here we highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain." The same goes for those who sought to create sanctuary for us in a pandemic and lost their lives in doing so.

What COVID has shown us, is that no one gets to keep their freedom without a cost. Those who died were seeking to give the gift of life. It is something that we honor by living ours in ways that loves our neighbors. It is why we wear masks. It is why I encourage you to get vaccinated if you haven't already too, if you can. It is why we will continue to mask when we return to worship in July. We choose life in order to honor theirs.

I believe God loves us too much to let us dry up with anxiety about our own lives. I believe that just as the Ruach blew life into the old Hebrew festival of the Harvest, reminding them of the goodness of a God who provides, and just as that mighty wind transformed frightened disciples into bold apostles who were seized with a passion for their mission in life, so is there a mighty wind blowing across your life. It is the creative Spirit of God. It's been blowing throughout this pandemic and it continues to blow now.

It may not be welcomed at first. It may feel awkward, or even confining. This wind may push you far from the place you prefer to be. And it may feel at first as confusing and disruptive as it did at the first Pentecost. It could begin with the loss of a job, an unwanted move, or the failure of a dream. It could pull you away from people you love. But if this wind has come from heaven, it is only meant to carry you to the place God has dreamed for you—the place where you will be able to do what you were created to do.

In that mission you will find your life. It won't be easy; it never is. It will cost a lot; it always does. And it will be risky. If it is safety you want, get a tomb. But if you want to be fully alive, then follow the wind. Amen.