

Acts 2:1-21

As sweat was dribbling down my back, chili and slaw juice were dribbling down his cheek, and I smiled- giving thanks to God for the beautiful day and also realizing how much we take for granted. Things like gathering together to share a meal around tables. Things like celebrating our differences and recognizing that we have more in common than we realize. This last year has stripped us of much, including in-person community meals. The delight yesterday here at Triune in the parking lot was palpable. Someone looked at me and said, “Can we do this more and more?” Even though I could not taste due to my allergies, it’s been a long time since I’ve tasted anything sweeter than community gathered in Christ’s name- the breaking of the bread and the pouring out of the cup. Looking out on the people there, there was joy in the gift of small breezes in the hot sun, as we ate together- some of us as a reunion and some of us for the first time. Eating and looking at mask-less faces was such a celebration of something we had not done together in a long time. I watched people rejoice in a way that I have yet to witness here at Triune yet is a way etched in the memories of this special place. It almost felt miraculous- definitely hope-filled, especially considering where we were last year at this time- no in-person worship at all. No sea of red in the congregation. No shared meal.

Today we celebrate Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit by fire, wind and word. The word Pentecost means “fiftieth,” and it coincides with a Jewish festival that took place 50 days after Passover which was a celebration of the spring harvest but later also became a way to remember the giving of the Ten Commandments. Luke tells us that 120 believers were gathered together in Jerusalem on the 50th day after Jesus’ resurrection when they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to

speak. Can you imagine? No wonder people asked what this meant while others thought they had gotten into the wine. Pentecost is the big bang event that sets the other events of the book of Acts into motion as well as our lives in the church today. Jesus' last words to his disciples in the Gospel of Luke were to remain in Jerusalem until "clothed with power from on high" (24:49). Jesus promised he would send an Advocate, the Holy Spirit, who would be the presence of the risen Christ throughout the world working to bring about the fullness of God's reign. Peter, filled with the Spirit, corrects the "drunk" comments in his sermon explaining the fulfillment of the word of the prophet Joel. By any stretch of the imagination, this is a fabulous story, full of riveting details. Tongues of fire. Rushing winds. Accusations of drunkenness. Mass baptism" (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net). In today's story, "The Spirit empowered the disciples to testify to Jesus' impact on their lives, emboldened the apostle Peter to preach to a bewildered crowd of skeptics, and drew 3,000 converts to faith in one day (that's a little further down in the story). But even with Peter's interpretation and reminder of Joel's prophecy (Joel 2:28-32)...it's hard for us in modern times to really comprehend the awe of Pentecost, isn't it? Some of us just say, "Oh, it's the birthday of the church," and it is, but it's also so much more- mysterious and complicated and beautiful.

When we hear about wind, fire or thunder in the Bible, many times it involves the presence of God. For example, in the stories of creation in Genesis, God's Spirit hovers over the waters and also offers life-giving breath. When many of us think of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the church and in our lives...we may not think of a howling wind and flames of fire?! We may think of water or a dove- like the Spirit in Jesus' baptism?! Or we may think that we aren't Pentecostal, so why should this story and the role of the Holy Spirit matter? And what about the

language deal? Here we find the mission of the early church being launched. The Holy Spirit is poured out upon the people of God, some scholars say reversing what God did at the Tower of Babel, and now the Galileans are telling of God's mighty works in the specific languages of the pious Jews from every nation who are living in Jerusalem. These people were drawn in by hearing their own languages being spoken by Galileans, and they were surprised and amazed. These Galileans didn't know these other languages. The Holy Spirit enabled them to speak in others' native tongue, and the Word of God spread like wildfire. Can you imagine the diversity represented there and yet, the understanding received that day? God is a borderless God who is always at work. God's gift reaches outward to those outside of Jesus' followers, thus connecting others while- "validating difference and working through it, not erasing difference and working despite it" (Ruiz). Baptized by the Holy Spirit, we're sent out to be witnesses in all of the earth, with as many languages as we know but especially with our native tongue. Because of the power of the Holy Spirit, the gospel of the risen Lord is being proclaimed to the ends of the earth. No matter where we go, the Holy Spirit is at work.

Peter reiterates the prophet Joel's proclamation that, "whereas formerly granted to individual prophets and kings, God's Spirit will now pour out onto 'all flesh,' regardless of gender, age, or social status" (Gilberto Ruiz, workingpreacher.org). Joel also says that there will be signs in the sky and everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Even in this rich story filled with many details, Pentecost is just as much our story as it is the story of those gathered that day. The Holy Spirit is at work daily in our lives and in the life of this church. How have you experienced the work of the Holy Spirit in your life? You know those things that happen that you know aren't you or times when you experience works of love,

peace, and justice...I call those the work or acts of the Holy Spirit. You know those times “whenever two plus two does not equal four but five- whenever you find yourself speaking with eloquence you know you do not have, or offering forgiveness or time you had not meant to offer- whenever you find yourself taking risks you thought you did not have the courage to take or reaching out to someone you had intended to walk away from. Times when it is as if a fresh wind blows through the room and clears everyone’s heads. These times- you can be almost certain are made possible by the Holy Spirit” (BBT, *Home By Another Way*).

It happened in a little hut church in Mozambique on Pentecost Sunday ten years ago. I was asked to prayerfully consider going with a group of people to Africa- specifically the countries of Mozambique and Malawi. We traveled from village to village, meeting people and listening to their stories of how God’s Spirit was at work in their lives. Unlike in this story, we had a translator to help everyone understand. It was humbling to hear of such joy and gratitude to God in the midst of such poverty. We saw wells that had been brought into communities that had previously had no water. No water at all. We saw villages that had no running water and needed a well. Talk about what we take for granted?! It was hot and dusty with no water in sight- no drinking, no bathing, no washing anything. It was Pentecost, and I was asked to preach in one of the remote villages we had visited earlier in the week. Talk about being intimidated and uncomfortable?! I most definitely was. Not only did I not speak the language, but they rarely had guest preachers, and especially not a white woman from the US. I wondered who was I to preach among these children of God? Really what I should’ve been remembering was who is God to bring me there. I had with me, an interpreter, Nedson, who was also our host. I had worked on what I would say, but I had nothing, and I had no clue how to convey what I wanted to say in a way that they

would understand. I truly had to trust God's Spirit at work, and I wasn't comfortable at all because I had no control. Silly me- like I have any control when I speak from any pulpit! It was really hot in the church and flies were buzzing around and landing on the children's heads, but the children didn't move on their makeshift, concrete- low to the ground- pews. As I looked out on the people gathered there that Sunday morning, some children had visible ringworm on their heads. Some were malnourished. Others were nursing from and being passed to different women in the room. The room was stale. The air was completely still- stagnant. I so badly wanted to grab for something to fan myself, but I had nothing that would work. I thought I was going to pass out. The small, concrete pews weren't comfortable, and I felt pressure to make my sermon short! The more I preached about the Holy Spirit, the hotter this small church became with its sunbaked, thatched roof. I began to tell a story from John Lewis' childhood. John Lewis, who died last summer and served as a Congressman in the 5th district of GA for many years. He was also the youngest leader in the Civil Rights Movement. I didn't know if the people in Mozambique knew anything about the Civil Rights Movement in the US, so I also mentioned apartheid, but Mozambique is not in South Africa. I kept preaching. Lewis tells the story of being seven years old and being at his Aunt and Uncle's house one day while his parents worked. His aunt and uncle were one of the few in the family that owned land and a house in Troy, Alabama, where he grew up with many of his cousins. One day during a storm, his Aunt called the twenty something children, who were playing in the yard, inside. The storm drew near, and then it struck! The house began to come loose from its foundation, so John Lewis' aunt gathered the children together and lined them up in the long hallway of the house and told them to hold hands. When the wind would pick up the edge of one side of the house, she would yell for them- while holding hands- to WALK WITH THE WIND. And they would walk in one

direction, holding hands and hold the house down. And the wind would blow in the opposite direction, and they would turn around and walk with the wind and hold that part of the house down. They continued doing this until the storm stopped. Lewis entitled his biography, “Walking With The Wind” because he used this metaphor as an approach for his faith and life- recognizing and giving credit to the work of the Holy Spirit. As a minister, husband, father, citizen and Congressman, John says that during the many storms that came in his life, he always chose to grab some hands and to walk with the wind. As I was finishing this story, all of a sudden, the stillness in the small church was interrupted by a burst of wind that quickly swept through the two glassless windows and picked up the edges of the plain tablecloth spread out on the communion table and laid it back down. Ok, it was more like a strong breeze, but it took my breath away. That rare breeze also caught the attention of everyone gathered on that Pentecost Sunday in a remote village in Africa. While we didn’t have the experience of speaking each other’s language, we had a translator who communicated God’s word, and we all felt a connection in the power of the Holy Spirit at work in that place. It was holy and a surprising gift of assurance and comfort. As a matter of fact, this morning I received a text from two of the people there saying that they’ll never forget that Pentecost Sunday.

This past year, in many ways, has felt like the stale, stagnant air I felt in that small church in Africa. And yesterday felt like the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the wonderful, small breezes that blew through the parking lot and our conversations. “There is no way to overstate how much we need to gather as God’s people right now and ask the Holy Spirit to instruct us, shape us, remake us, and commission us. We need fresh language of bridge building. We need new words to rekindle love and relationships. We need the wind and fire of God’s Spirit

to challenge our complacencies, reset our priorities, ease our anxieties, and move us out” (Thomas). And as we venture out, may we look for those little breezes- the fresh wind- that cuts the stale, stillness of the world, bringing new life after so much loss. May we remember that God’s Spirit has been poured out on us as well. We’re witnesses...even in our doubts and in our amazement- proclaiming God’s love and the saving work of Jesus Christ in this world. So grab a hand and let’s walk with the wind. Thanks be to God! Amen.