

“Wild Spirit”

Rev. David Gregory

June 9, 2019

Pentecost



First reading

Pentecost by Sam Hawkins

Buildings for the most part are boxes square.
But Pentecost circles and spirals,
they turn and burn wild.

Of those who would tame
and make comprehensible any fire—
apt tongues have gone titch titch
and beautiful catch ‘til words and music
and parlour diplomacies fortify
much which is untrue.

Fear has no finish, even in our dying.
The path is a cliff edge.

Let us turn, un-adult-like, and strip ourselves
of civilized persuasions. Usher
Earth’s children into primordial worlds.

Water shall love and receive us, as it always has.
The naked ground will speak up,
into our touching feet.

Listen to the tongues of the wind.
Unhinge the body, which is you.

Let all creation fly.

Second reading

Acts 2:1-8, 12-13 from the Common English Bible

When Pentecost Day arrived, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound from heaven like the howling of a fierce wind filled the entire house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be individual flames of fire alighting on each one of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak. There were pious Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. When they heard this sound, a crowd gathered. They were mystified because everyone heard them speaking in their native languages. They were surprised and amazed, saying, “Look, aren’t all the people who are speaking Galileans, every one of them? How then can each of us hear them speaking in our native language?” They were all surprised and bewildered. Some asked each other “What does this mean?” Others jeered at them, saying “They’re full of new wine!”

Happy Pentecost! It’s not something we are inclined to say, but in our tradition, it ought to hold equal weight with “Merry Christmas” and “Happy Easter,” and maybe even more weight since Christmas and Easter are of more pagan, Roman origins—fourth century additions, thanks to Constantine. By now you have heard me say any number of times that Christianity did not begin as an establishment of the new major world religion that developed under the Romans. It began as a sect or a subset of Judaism, with a number of Jesus followers huddled in an upper room during a Jewish festival in Jerusalem. Pentecost in the Christian tradition is tied to its Jewish roots, for the earliest Jewish followers of the Jewish Jesus were gathered in Jerusalem, along with several thousand others for the “Feast of Weeks” or the “Feast of Pentecost,” a pilgrimage which marked a time seven weeks after Passover in which they celebrated the summer wheat harvest. It also became known as Pentecost commemorating the giving of the Torah, or the first five books of the law, also known as the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. For the followers of Jesus, it was also seven weeks after the crucifixion, a period of confused introspection, of “living the questions hand in hand,” a time of not knowing exactly what to do, but knowing that whatever they were going to do, they were going to do it together. When they didn’t know what to do, they stayed in community. This is not bad advice for any people who are in discernment. It’s a good time to stay together.

It is said that Jesus, on the night of his betrayal and arrest, had told his inner circle that he would send them “another helper” to be their guide. This helper, this Holy Spirit, would guide them in truth and in power, and be the continuing incarnation of the “Divine in us.” Maybe they were consciously waiting for that Spirit during the Festival, and maybe they weren’t. But I would imagine their expectation was not the kind of experience Luke recounts for us in the Book of Act: the sound of a rushing, mighty wind; individual flames of fire appearing over their heads; supernatural phenomena—inexplicable, unbelievable, and at the same time incontrovertible. It was a mind-altering, life changing event, a pivotal moment, a shift in paradigm. Nothing would ever be the same again. From that day forward, these rag-tag, impoverished, peasants who had followed their insurgent rabbi throughout the hills of Galilee, would be empowered to speak, to influence, and to heal, to do the things Jesus did. They would create a powerful movement

within Jewish walls that would grow for the next three decades, until the Romans would come and destroy Jerusalem, sending them and their message to the far reaches of the Empire. And they lived happily ever after . . . sort of.

Let's fast-forward a couple thousand years. By the twentieth century in America, there was an entire segment of conservative Christianity dedicated to the elevation of the forgotten power source known as the Holy Spirit. Theologians had made this Spirit known as the third person of the Trinity, as in "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," with emphasis on the "truth" which Christians would aspire to know.

But the "Pentecostals," as they would come to be known, would insist that there were any number of spiritual gifts, present in the first century, without which twentieth century Christians could never experience the fullness of what it means to follow Jesus. Miraculous healings, prophesying, speaking in tongues—these are a few of the signs and wonders that people claimed for themselves. It became an entire charismatic movement within most major denominations in the mid-20th century. For some it was heresy, for others it was life-giving.

When I was younger, I had an opinion, but as with most things, I know less about it now than I did back then, and my ignorance is blissful. I don't need to draw the lines any more. You can have your own experience of faith and practice and I applaud you, whatever that is for you. I'm really more interested in what it means for me. I can count at least five experiences in my life that have radically shifted who I am, what I do, and how I am in this world. These are the moments that I can point to and say, "nothing would ever be the same again." If you want to know what those experiences were, you'll have to wait for my book. What is more important for you in this moment is to ask the questions of your own life. Where are the radical shifts for you? What have been the life-altering events that have taken you on a completely different trajectory? There is likely a theme to those life alterations. For a poet by the name of Sam Hawkins the themes have had to do with the wild freedom of Holy Spirit, the unusual, the out-of-the-ordinary. For him the power of Pentecost is in its wild freedom.

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Let all creation fly.

In a way, it sounds like too much freedom, too little control. It wouldn't be prudent. And yet, I do not suppose there was anyone in first-century Jerusalem who thought that what went on in the upper room at the Feast of Pentecost was ordinary. The only explanation was that they were all drunk on new wine. That must have been it. OK, that's good. We thought for a moment there was something supernatural going on. They're just sloshed. Got it. Everyone, back to normal. There's no story here.

Our community here has experienced some pretty radical shifts in the past. Some of those shifts have been amazing, and some of them have been rather destabilizing. Our life together is much the same as our lives individually. We all like to find our equilibrium as best we can. How are things going to be? Will we have a future? Can we get the roof to stop leaking? Will this ministry continue into the 22nd century? Should it? What might that look like? And in a very real sense, we are like those disciples in the upper room, who were a bit confused as to what to do next. And then the wind started to blow. And all creation began to fly.

Today, we can stay in our square boxes, or we can step into the vortex of the Spirit's circles and spirals. We can maintain what is predictable, what is manageable, what is controllable. Or we can take steps toward a vision of something new for our community. We can live by our fears, or we can take the path at the cliff's edge. It's the difference between lifeless words and powerful deeds. Pentecost is power. It belongs to us if we simply plug in.

