

“The Wind and the Rainbow”*

Acts 2: 1–21; John 14: 8 – 17; Psalm 104, 24 – 34, 35b

St. James Presbyterian Church
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Many years ago, when my children were small, my daughter came home from school with some science homework. This was in Singapore, where most days were sunny and bright, and the lesson must have been about light and prisms. But the homework was about rainbows.

There were two parts to the assignment, and they went something like this. *Step One:* “Go out into the garden with a garden hose. Create a gentle spray of water, and direct it so that it catches the sunlight. Experiment until you find just the right angle, so that the beams of light shine through the spray of droplets in just the right way, and you will see a rainbow.” So far so good: my daughter did that, and found just the right angle, so that the sunlight caught in the mist, and the rainbow beautifully and miraculously appeared. *Step Two:* “Have ready a large sheet of white paper. Once the rainbow is showing in the mist, reach carefully behind it with one hand — and with a quick slap transfer that rainbow onto the paper.” That part of the lesson didn’t work so well. The rainbow did *not* get transferred to the paper. The observed actual results, speaking scientifically, were these: soggy paper, a disappointed child, and cross parents. My daughter did learn one extra thing: it is not so easy to capture a rainbow.

The Holy Spirit is like that. It can produce stunning effects, but it is hard to capture, hard to explain. In Greek the one word, πνευμα (*pneuma*), is used for wind, and breath, and spirit, all three, and the Holy Spirit is elusive, like wind, and life-giving, like breath. “The wind blows where it chooses,” Jesus tells Nicodemus, “and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes” (John 3: 8). “Which way does the wind blow,” asks an old children’s song, “and where does it go?” As for breath, it is said that in the beginning God brought the still form of Adam to life by breathing

* This sermon text is provided as a help to listeners with hearing or language difficulties, as well as others who are interested. It is not intended as a fully-documented publication — and it may differ from the sermon as preached.

into him; in the book of Ezekiel, the Lord breathes upon those dry bones — the slain multitudes of Israel — to bring them to life again. The Holy Spirit is like both wind and breath, *pneuma*: powerful, life-giving, and real. Yet it is also elusive, fluid, and hard to explain. Like the rainbow, it cannot be captured, nor can it be controlled, contained, or commanded. It is free.

Maybe that's why we need two accounts of the Holy Spirit on this Pentecost morning — two quite different accounts. One is a dramatic depiction of the visiting of the Holy Spirit on the disciples, and through them to Jewish people from every nation in the streets of Jerusalem. The other is a gentle prediction of the coming of the Spirit — before it is given. One is a very public; the other intimate, personal. One is very noisy, the other quiet. Both of them have important things to tell us about the Holy Spirit.

In the Acts passage, the disciples have already been galvanized, electrified by the resurrection appearances of Jesus. Their hope, once dashed, as they saw Jesus lifted up on the cross, has already been rekindled. Then, unbidden — because none of us can command the wind — the Holy Spirit rushes into the room where the disciples have gathered and descends upon them, in tongues as of flame. It fills the room and it fills the disciples themselves; when it does, they are changed utterly. Suddenly, those who were scattered, dispirited, and silent, are gathered, empowered, and full of words. Peter himself, who on the night of Jesus's arrest and before the crow of the cock three times refused to speak, Peter himself finds own tongue loosed and freed, and he along with the other disciples rushes like a wind out into the streets to proclaim Jesus to the multitudes in the streets. Their own tongues are amplified, multiplied, so that suddenly they are speaking in whatever language people need to hear — in Parthian and Medean and Egyptian — or, for us, English, French, Cree, Korean, Chinese, Micmaw, and Arabic.

At the heart of this story — this story that marks the moment when the gathered community of Christ's followers took their good news with power out into the world around them — is the real experience of the early Christian community. They experienced Jesus as still with them, powerfully so. And in spite of all odds, in spite of the trial and suffering and death of Jesus, in spite of their own many failures, their cowardice, misunderstandings, and silence, they too have been transformed. They have become new people. This day, this day of Pentecost, completes the promise of Easter, for it shows the new life of Jesus Christ continuing to transform the world, one heart, one mind, one per-

son at a time, even when he no longer walks among them, or us. And this is not of our own doing; it is a gift of God.

The American scholar William Willimon points out that the story of Pentecost in Acts, along with all of the conversion stories (Saul, Cornelius, Peter on the rooftop, the Ethiopian eunuch in the desert) are not meant so much to convert unbelievers as to confirm converted believers. Transformation — the touch of the Holy Spirit — doesn't have to happen in a rush. It is a process, a way of life really. But it does draw us into a new community, a new family, and new tasks to do. At its heart is the sense of the presence of Jesus in the midst of his community of followers.

And this is what Jesus promises his disciples at the Last Supper, in our reading from the St. John's gospel. For the disciples reclining at table with Jesus, the passion, the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the ascension all lie ahead. They are just approaching the sorrow of it all, the drama, the surprise. The promise that Jesus would send them an Advocate must have seemed very dim, unlikely, and inadequate to them. Yet Jesus promises what in Greek is named the *Paraclete*, the "one called alongside." We translate Paraclete in many ways — Counsellor, Helper, Comforter, Advocate — but the idea is the same: the Paraclete is the "one who comes to take Jesus' place" after he has gone from this world, and who testifies on his behalf. "You know him," Jesus tells his disciples, "because he abides *with* you and will be *in* you." He is the Spirit of Truth, and Truth in the Gospel of John is Jesus Christ — the Way, the Truth, and the Life. In the words of biblical scholar Judith McDaniel, this Spirit of Truth will keep Jesus alive and present in the community, and not just in the community, but in the individual Christian as well. It will "make a home within us — to become," for us, "a way of life . . . that permeates our very being."

How "might we describe the calling to discover what is deepest in the human soul in order to find God in the midst of life?" While we cannot capture, we cannot command, we cannot control the Spirit of Truth, we are nevertheless summoned to a continuous process of truth, to a way of truth. And this requires of us "openness to learning the truth, and perpetual engagement with the mystery of grace — and attitude of receptivity, and a sense of awe."¹

¹ Judith M. McDaniel, *Feasting on the Word*.

And we will discover that the Spirit is on our side, because Jesus is on our side.

Several months ago, a friend of mine who works occasionally as a chaplain in a women's prison told me about how the women in this prison heard the story from the Gospel of John that we too have heard today. It's a short-term prison, with maximum stays of no more than two years. Even so, everyone there understands that she like everyone else has problems, is broken, has really messed up. Otherwise, she wouldn't be there. So the women are quite open about their problems and their needs, and they don't try to pretend. In this context, when my friend read the passage about the Advocate, some of the women got quite excited. "Advocate!" one woman said. "Advocate! Does that mean that he takes our part? Does that mean that he's on our side?"

Indeed it does. The Advocate is on the side of Jesus, the voice of truth, and he is on our side also. Knowing that, trusting in that, perhaps we can walk further into the way of truth, and open ourselves to the truth that is already here if we have eyes to see, ears to hear. This is the way of transformation, the way of community, and the way of walking in love out into the world.

One morning, I was on my way to church, just after a shower of rain. The air was still wet and full of spray and the sun was still shining, I thought there might have been a rainbow. I might have seen it, but to tell you the truth, I forgot to look.

In the old story, the rainbow was a symbol of a new peace between God and human-kind — a battle-bow made beautiful, and laid across the heavens when the storms seemed threatening. But we have a better sign and symbol of peace in Jesus Christ, who is more than sign, symbol, or even fulfillment.

He is a lively presence among us, with power and grace to make us into new people in the sight of God. He is made known to us in our life through the accompaniment of the Holy Spirit, and in our hearts through the Paraclete. Though we cannot capture, command, or control him, let us not forget to look for him, to open our hearts to the Spirit whom Jesus sends to continue to make him present, and active, and transforming within us, among us, and in our ministry to the world.

Amen.