

Sermon "Rustle Our Leaves"

Kirk of St James

Sunday May 28th, 2023

Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

Numbers 11:24-30, Psalm 104:24-35, Acts 2:1-21

Out of all the quirks living on the east coast of Canada one of my favourites is summer thunderstorms. When I used to work at a camp along the Northumberland Strait there would a few big ones each summer. It was always a curious event because we would check the weather report in the morning and there would be thunderstorm warnings but most days the sun was out, there were no clouds in the sky and it seemed like the most unlikely thing. Then suddenly the wind would whip up, you could see rain coming from in the distance and it was pouring. Then the thunder would follow, and the lightening would travel up the straight. Often after it passed the sun would come out and the only evidence that there had been a storm was the wet grass it left behind.

I often think that Pentecost is a lot like one of those storms. The disciples followed Jesus, learned from him, were astounded at his death and resurrection, and are now sorting out what they are going to do next. Just when it seems like everything is over the Holy Spirit comes crashing in like a storm. The wind, the sounds, the chaos, fire, and languages. And as soon as it arrives it is gone again. The evidence is still there though because they are speaking different languages. The people around them take notice, the only problem is they seem to have missed

the storm of Pentecost and decide that the disciples must have been drinking. They missed the arrival of the spirit. All of those prophecies and promises generation after generation, about the messiah and still when it finally comes true people are either surprised or, in disbelief. And even though Jesus promises the disciples they will not be left alone they were not really expecting Pentecost.

Before we get into Pentecost it might first be helpful to understand why the disciples were gathered and what they were celebrating. Theologian and Biblical scholar N.T Wright has a wonderful explanation of this. The word Pentecost in Greek means fiftieth. As Wright explains for a first century Jewish person, Pentecost was the fiftieth day after the Passover. It was an agricultural festival also known as The Festival of Weeks. “This was a day when farmers brought the first sheaf of wheat from the crop, and offered it to God, partly as a sign of gratitude and partly as a prayer that all the rest of the crop, too, would be safely gathered in.” While that was certainly part of it, these festivals were also meant to awaken the stories and memories of the Jewish people, including the promises to Abraham, the Exodus from Egypt, the 50 days after Passover when they came to Mt. Sanai and Moses received the ten commandments. All these things are a part of the greater story. “Pentecost, the fiftieth day, isn’t in other words just about the ‘first fruits,’ the sheaf which says the harvest has begun, it is about the way of life God has given and how they continue to live that out.” It is easy for us to miss out on some

of that background to Pentecost because for us is we associate it with the arrival of the Holy Spirit.

Every year when Pentecost rolls around I find myself struggling to articulate what it represents, and to be honest some of it is beyond human understanding. N.T Wright likens it to listening to a forecast trying to describe a hurricane. There is a certain amount that perhaps we can predict--we can measure wind speeds and other things like that but, overall, there is a lot of unpredictability. It is much the same with Pentecost. Wright concludes "It is far more important that you are out there in the wind, letting it sweep through you life, your heart, your imagination, your powers of speech, and transform you from a listless or lifeless believer into someone whose heart is on fire with the love of God." That is both an exhilarating and terrifying thought isn't it? I always loved Annie Dillard's description when she says "Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? 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. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."

It is a challenge isn't it? It is easy to get comfortable in both our faith and our lives. The pandemic was/is a reminder of how used to certain ways of life we

can get and how uncomfortable and scary it can be to be shaken out of not only routines but also how we understand and interact with the world around us. I don't know about you, but I often like routine, I like knowing what to expect. The inclination is to go back to what we know as quickly as we can and that is a completely understandable response. I think that is part of what made the pandemic so uncomfortable—while things are “back to normal” we also know they are not, and our lived experience from the last three years stays with us.

I look back on this moment with the disciples when their lives were upended by wind, and fire, by chaos, and new languages and I wonder what would have happened if the disciples had that experience and then tried to go back to life as normal. What if they had decided to return to the homes and the occupations they had before they met Jesus? What if they took it simply as an experience and never let it change their lives? Things would have looked quite different.

Pentecost often feels like a bucket of cold water has been poured over my head. It leaves me wondering about how we might meet the Holy Spirit at work in our lives and communities in new ways? How can we allow the creativity and power of the Holy Spirit to move us? God promises that all we have to do is ask. It is anyone's guess what the Holy Spirit will do but we should be prepared “for fire and wind, for some fairly drastic spring cleaning of the dusty and cold rooms of one's life. But we should not doubt that God will give his spirit to all who seek him.” May it blow into our lives in new and life-giving ways, clearing away our doubts and fears, and letting us see and hope in new ways. Come Holy Spirit this Pentecost Sunday and every day to follow.