

“Amazed and Perplexed”
Sermon by Rev. Dr. David D. Colby
The House of Hope Presbyterian Church in St. Paul
June 5, 2022
Scripture: Acts 2:1-21

It is the rather wild story of the birth of the church on what we now call Pentecost Sunday. My name is Dave Colby, and I am really pleased to be here with you this morning. I am delighted to participate in what you are calling “A Celebration Year of Preaching and Music.” As Dr. Anderson said, I am now serving as the Transitional General Presbyter for Winnebago Presbytery.

Even life-long Presbyterians scratch their heads when I have to share that title. It’s a mouthful. I did not grow up wanting to become a transitional general presbyter. Baseball player, yes. Astronaut, absolutely. Transitional General Presbyter . . . not so much. I often have to explain what that title means and what it is that I do. The best thing that I have come up with so far is that I sometimes say that Presbyterians don’t have bishops – we don’t put that much power or authority in any one person – but if we did have bishops I would be a transitional, or interim, bishop for NE Wisconsin. While I do much of my work from my home office here in St. Paul, my job is to support the Presbyterian pastors and congregations of northeast Wisconsin and connect them to resources and help them work on vision, identity, and strategic planning. Not only is my role transitional, many of the churches in that region are in a transitional time. Between pastors. Trying to figure out what it means to be church in this strange new world. While the job title is a bit awkward, I really do enjoy this work of supporting churches and pastors during a transitional period. It’s good to be with you today in the sanctuary and I’d like to give a special welcome to those who are worshipping online.

Let’s begin with a prayer.

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable in thy sight, for you, O Lord, are our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In chapter one of this book filled with tales from the early church, Jesus ordered the disciples not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there, saying, “This is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized by the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (Acts 1:4-5).

Our story begins with those same disciples following that order and staying put. Waiting. In between that order to stay put and our story today, a few things happened. Jesus left them. Someone did some preaching. They nominated and elected a new leader, and added that person to the leadership team. Sounds familiar, right, as we just participated in that very Presbyterian practice of ordaining and installing elders, deacons, and trustees. We need new leaders, even when we don’t yet know exactly where we are going.

And then they were left to wait. Even if Jesus had not ordered them to wait, perhaps that is what they would have done because they weren't sure what else to do. Waiting for this new thing, this gift Jesus promised, waiting for a new direction. Waiting for any directions. Waiting is the hardest part, right.

Waiting – waiting for the flight to board, waiting for the surgeon to come to the family waiting room, waiting for the last day of school, waiting on Christmas morning for the parents to wake up so you can open gifts. Waiting in the one line at the grocery store that has a human checker, realizing that some day soon you're going to have to learn how to check out your produce at the self-check out line. Or is that just me? Waiting for this pandemic to finally be over. Waiting is the hardest part. Here, at the House of Hope, waiting for the next pastor to arrive. Heck, waiting for an interim pastor. Waiting for Julia to return from her sabbatical. Waiting for a decisive word about what to do. Waiting is hard.

After having Jesus among them and with them, he told this group of disciples to wait – but wait for what was not exactly clear. Can you put yourselves in their sandals for a minute? What do you think they were feeling? What were they worried about? Were they wondering what more, if anything, they should do while they waited? Did they wonder whether they would know when this promised thing would arrive and when it would be time to stop waiting?

Susan Beaumont is a consultant, coach, spiritual director, and church consultant. Here is how she describes this waiting period.

Organizational life is full of liminal experiences – seasons where something has ended, but a new thing has not yet begun. Seasons where watching and waiting can be difficult, overplanning can be futile, and it simply isn't helpful to pretend that we understand what happens next. Liminal seasons are challenging, disorienting, and unsettling. We strive to move forward with purpose and certainty. Instead, we feel as though we are trudging through mud, moving away from something comfortable and known, toward something that can't yet be known.¹

Trudging through mud. Moving away from that past that was known toward something that cannot yet be known. It's a hard spot in which to wait. It's a hard spot in which to lead. Good luck and thank you and God be with you to those who were just installed as elders, deacons, and trustees who will join others in the work of leading during a liminal season, another time of transition here at House of Hope. But take heart – you, they, we are not the first people of hope to engage in that work. And it may be more rewarding and even fun than they can even imagine on this day.

In our story from the Bible, there the disciples are, waiting. The pace picks up, “and suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting” (Acts 2:2). It is quite an image, the arrival of the Holy Spirit as this sound like the rush of a violent wind, filling the house, and then tongues of fire, and languages from around the known world being spoken and, even better, understood.

It is a wonderful image for the Holy Spirit. They don't see the wind in this telling, they hear the sound, but even then, it is like the rush of a violent wind. It is a wonderful image of the

holy as something like wind that can be described by its aftereffects rather than seen directly. As something like wind – you cannot quite see it, but you can see the trees blowing or the flames dancing.

The other day I was doing some much needed tidying up. I'm not sure I could call it spring cleaning, exactly. But with my working remotely, and a family with two jobs, and sports practices every night, and end of year school stuff – I was tidying things up. I created separate neat piles of my stuff: bills over there, work documents here, fragments of sermons there, baseball coaching papers; a smaller pile for Laura, a pile for kid #1, kid #2. It felt like I had accomplished something in being able to see the stuff that I had to do – all there in a few organized piles. Because it was Spring and a bit warmer, I had the doors and windows open – and a huge gust of wind took those carefully constructed piles and sent things flying. All that tidying up, gone in an instant.

As we witnessed again in another round of violent storms this week, wind is not easily domesticated, controlled. Wind can be scary. Wind may not be such a comforting image for God for those who like predictability and certainty. Although I will confess that during this cultural moment when people are quick to say with apparent certainty that they know exactly what God thinks about various issues, I appreciate this image that reminds us that God is not easily put into a box of human making.

The church remembers this moment as its birthday, with this sound like a rushing wind, and with the gift of the Holy Spirit aiding in listening to diverse voices and interpretation. And children serving as prophets and young adults seeing visions and old ones dreaming dreams, and a rekindled promise that the Spirit will continue to be poured out on the people. And the people in the room where it happens are amazed.

When it feels like we have been slogging through mud, waiting and watching, and realizing that we are overplanning and it is not helping, this image of the Holy Spirit arriving like a rush of violent wind is going to remind us that not everything is in our control, and we alone are not responsible for charting the course.

It was a really windy, cold, Minnesota spring day. And I was huddled on a park and rec field, wearing ski pants under lined pants, with a hooded sweatshirt and my winter coat. Spring in Saint Paul. My son is playing on a middle school Ultimate Frisbee team – Max and a couple of his teammates have played competitively, but most of the team and their opponents that day were absolute beginners. Ultimate Frisbee is kind of like a cross between football and soccer, where each team tries to advance the frisbee toward an end zone by throwing and catching it before there is an incomplete pass or interception.

It is fairly easy to throw a frisbee back and forth. Until you have someone guarding you, trying to keep you from throwing or your teammate from catching. Or unless there is a lot of wind. So this was a game of mostly beginners, playing on a cold, rainy day, with winds gusting in all directions. It was pretty miserable. The wind made it really difficult for the players. The frisbee could be flying seven feet up in the air only to get slapped down by the wind to nose height, and then on other plays the wind might come from below the frisbee and sending it aloft

and sailing out of the playing field. So unpredictable. It made for a frustrating experience, certainly for the players and also for the fans.

It is a difficult time to lead churches right now. It feels like we are throwing frisbees into a strong headwind. Not advancing down the field and instead playing defense and trying not to lose too much ground. Then from out of nowhere the wind gusts unpredictably making us look silly. We are not in a time when tinkering and making slight adjustments is sufficient to the challenges of these days. It can feel like we are beginners and we cannot get the frisbee to go where we want it to go. But let's take a start at naming some issues that the church should address.

It is Pride month – and that, in my mind, is worth mentioning and celebrating at church. Alongside that joy and the sense of progress within the church and society, we are also still living amidst a pandemic and poisoned and polarized politics. And war in Ukraine and so many mass shootings. It has been twelve days since we learned the name Uvalde, and I don't think we have really yet started to process our grief. Since then, so many more mass shootings. It feels like we are walking through mud and way too much blood trying to get to a better place. And so, in these times, and in this particular place, the questions for us are: How will we respond? How will you incubate hope and provide sanctuary for this city? What is God calling us to be and do in these days?

Instead of quick answers to important questions that need your exploration, come with me back to the middle school frisbee game, because out of the blue there was a moment. No one could have predicted it. A kid threw the frisbee and this time it was a pretty good throw toward the endzone. And then the wind gusted and sent the frisbee just drifting further and further out ahead, just holding that disc spinning aloft, allowing a middle school kid who moments ago was totally out of position, could now run and run and the wind just held that frisbee up and then she caught it. The person who threw it, and the player who caught it were amazed and the fans, well, we were amazed and perplexed that it worked out so well. It was a magical moment.

Susan Beaumont, the church consultant who I quoted earlier about these liminal times leaving us feeling like we are trudging through mud, also believes that it is because of these waiting times that this is when the church can really lift off. Yes, these transitional times are challenging, disorienting and unsettling, but they are also “exciting and innovative. The promise of a new beginning unleashes creative energy, potential, and passion. All truly great innovations are incubated in liminality. God's greatest work occurs in liminal space.”²

Some of you may be here in this sanctuary or worshipping online for the first time, or the first time in a long time. Maybe it feels like you have been in your own season of waiting and today is a chance to start making a new beginning. Or to simply enjoy this moment with no pressure or arm-twisting. I'm glad you are here.

Others of you, those who were just ordained and/or installed to positions of leadership have been involved in this church for some time now. And for those of you who are a part of this community, you use an image of an anchor. The name of your monthly newsletter in fact. And we can use an anchor in challenging times. We need to be anchored to hope, anchored to

values, it is a worthy endeavor to invest in a strong community and a beautiful building that can be a house of hope for this city for decades to come. But let me suggest that alongside this image of an anchor you think of that frisbee on a windy day. For in some ways we are all beginners in this journey of faith. Disappointments and struggles are to be expected but every once in a while, the wind might gust at exactly the right time, and we will be in the right place, to catch hold of it even if for a moment. we might catch up to what God is spinning there in front of us, if only we have eyes to see and ears to hear.

Happy Pentecost to you and as it was on that first Pentecost day, may this be an amazing time for listening to prophetic children, and seeing visions of the church as it might become, and dreaming dreams together. May it be so for us all, and for this House of Hope community. Amen.

¹ Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019) 2.

² Ibid.