*The Wind Blows Where It Will*

Numbers 11:24-33

Acts 2:1-21

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Dear Friends,

I’m a preacher’s kid, and one of the realities of my growing up years was the Saturday scramble to find something for the children’s sermon. My Dad (the preacher) and my Mom (not a preacher, a social worker, but actually, someone with a pretty brilliant theological mind herself) would often wind up going through an inventory of the basement, the garage, even through the toys in my siblings and my bedrooms, to find something, anything, that could be a physical illustration of the sermon. As we kids got older, we often would join in this hunt.

My Dad loved a good creative children’s message, and Pentecost (with the flames and wind) is really an opportunity to shine in this department. I believe there was an occasion that involved a blowtorch, and even after he was no longer doing congregational ministry, there was a time when he called to describe to me another children’s message he saw: this pastor rigged up some sort of attachment of a toilet paper roll to a leaf blower, and when he fired it up, the sanctuary filled with streamers of the toilet paper. Dad really appreciated the drama and ingenuity of this, and I think he was a little jealous that he’d never thought of this one.

Now, I’ve decided that perhaps, when we are here, in a historic building, in the midst of some major building work, it might not be the time or place to introduce the Spirit with an illustration involving a blowtorch or the wind power of a leaf blower and the chaos of toilet paper (and, also, I want to make sure I don’t go down in history at the preacher who burned the pulpit at House of Hope, and ensure that my family can continue to attend church here… ) So I’m sparing you the big and bold sermon illustration this morning.

But picture it in your mind: these vivid illustrations of Pentecost that we get from scripture.

Wind, Fire, and Clouds: all things we find comforting in some contexts, but disturbing when they get out of hand.

In the gospel of John, Jesus says: “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes “ (John 3:8) And in that description is both the beautiful creative freedom of the Spirit; and the reminder that the Spirit is beyond our control.

And you know, here’s the problem with reading Acts 2 on Pentecost. We just read this little part of Acts 2, and it almost seems like the Spirit stays in that room. It’s powerful enough to be heard outside, but mostly, it stays in the room.

Acts chapter 2 is only part of the story. The work of the Spirit continues throughout the book of Acts: these followers take the good news of Jesus Christ to the corners of their world. Acts 2 is the first fruits. (Remember: they were gathered to celebrate a Jewish holiday, Shavuot, which at the time was focused on celebrating and bringing the first of the summer fruit harvest to the Temple. And like that festival of first fruits, Acts 2 is also just the first fruits, not the final bounty.

And Acts 2 is not the first time the Spirit is poured out on God’s people, either.

Numbers 11 is also a story of God pouring out the spirit. It happens just after Moses and the people have left Mt. Sinai, and the people of Israel are sick of traveling. And Moses is sick of their complaints. (Honestly, I saved this part to read during the sermon myself because I do so appreciate the way Moses brings the drama….)

[Moses] asked the Lord, ‘Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their ancestors? …I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me—if I have found favor in your eyes—and do not let me face my own ruin.’

(Numbers 11:11-15)

God’s answer is to pour out the Spirit not just on Moses, but on a group of chosen elders as well. (Friends, did you know the first session of elders came about because Moses, the pastor, the shepherd of the people, had a big epic sulk? WHO KNEW?!?)

But, then there’s a scandal. Eldad and Medad were not able to make it to the tent, and these two, even though they are off in the camp with the normal people, they get the Spirit anyway, and they start to prophesy *in the camp*!

People are horrified by this: it seems very out of order, and they send for Moses.

But Moses? Well he just wishes that the Spirit were present this way in everyone. Eldad and Medad are not the scandal, as far as Moses is concerned. Eldad and Medad are how things ought to be: God’s Spirit, moving where it will, not just around the tent where God lives, but out through the whole world. Moses essentially wishes for the world that is coming in the book the Acts.

You see, the Spirit is a scandal….

… the Spirit moves in ways that defy all of our ideas about order and decorum, and who *should* be the one speaking on behalf of the Spirit of God.

The Spirit goes way out past the tent or building where we think God is contained.

And the Spirit inspires people to say things that are so nuts that people think, “the only explanation? They’re out of their minds; or under the influence….”

In both Acts and Numbers, we are reminded that you cannot control the Spirit, you cannot contain the Spirit; the Spirit is going to get out, and it is going to get to work, whether or not we are going to join it.

And sometimes I wonder if this is the great mistake of the white, North American church in the late 20th and early 21st century: we’ve forgotten that the Spirit is moving not just in the church but in the world.

It’s not that our theology doesn’t have room for the idea that God moves powerfully outside of the Church, and often moves without, or even in spite of, us Christians. I think it’s just something that we forgot, and desperately need to reclaim.

If we reclaim this idea that God is waiting everywhere, then our job is to look outside of our walls; identify the places where the Spirit is moving; and run toward those places.

And this is important: when we get to those places where the Spirit is working, to fall in step. We don’t have to take over, we don’t have to be in charge. We can join the work that is ongoing because we are confident God has led us to this place.

I could do the preacher thing here and warm you up with a bunch of easy illustrations of this. But I’m going to skip right to hard ones, the ones that are a little scandalous: because the Spirit is out there in the world, and the Spirit is doing things that are meant to look a little extreme, a little nuts. So we’re going to skip the easy stuff.

One of the places I see the Church getting in step with something that happened in the wider world? Every time I see a congregation who march together in a Pride parade? That is exactly a situation where a group of Christians have been paying attention to a movement that happened in spite of us Christians, even a movement that happened in opposition to an enormous mistake we Christians have made for centuries. LGBTQ advocacy on the whole is not something that started in the Church. But there are congregations who saw it happening outside their walls and decided this was the Spirit’s work, and literally are now in step. (And, I say this as much to preach to myself as anyone else, there is still so much more we could do.) I wonder how we can keep at it, and even more, come alongside the holy work the Spirit is doing with God’s LGBTQ children? Where is the Spirit going next? Are we going to follow?

Another example? The Black Lives Matter movement. And let’s remember how slow most white churches were to support this. BLM didn’t start in 2020…it took awhile for most of us white Christians to *really* start paying attention. Even in the black Church, there are ways that the BLM movement has pushed Christians to reconsider how they organize (BLM is less about a few hero-leaders, and more about, shall we say, the Spirit descending on a whole group of people….[[1]](#footnote-1)) It’s challenged large parts of the black Church (and the white Church) to reckon with the fact that church people have not always supported women, LGBTQ folks, and others who are marginalized [[2]](#footnote-2), and BLM has challenged all Christians to understand more fully what it actually means to follow the Spirit and to do the work it takes to make the gospel news of freedom a reality for those we’ve pushed aside.

And for the white Church, even the progressive white Church: well, baby steps. We are slowly, I think, I hope, slowly, realizing how essential it is that we address white supremacy. And I think we are slowly realizing how hard it is to have the courage and the humility to admit that we aren’t the ones with solutions: but instead, we have to pay attention and listen for what the Spirit is saying, and often what the Spirit is saying beyond our walls, and how we’re being called to join in by getting behind, coming alongside, and avoiding the temptation to put ourselves at the center.

….by the way, just in the last weeks, our Presbytery has affirmed this incredible institutional race and equity self-assessment report. Phil was a member of the task force, so you should ask him about it after church. And I don’t have a good quote from it that succinctly proves that it goes right along with what I’m saying right now about the work of Spirit, but let me tell you, if you read it, you will see…it is a fine invitation to Holy Spirit work for us to do…)[[3]](#footnote-3)

I realize these are big assignments and aspirations: that we need to join the Spirit’s work in movements like BLM and LGBTQ rights

But sometimes we are able to look for the smaller opportunities when we know how to recognize the big ones.

And in a way, it makes me think about the gift of my family’s Saturday night scramble to find a children’s sermon illustration.

I am so grateful my parents included the kids in that brainstorming. Because I recognize now that it was training in theological imagination. We were searching through boxes in the basement and toy cabinets, looking for the perfect secular thing that was actually an illustration of the sacred. And isn’t that our call as Christians, our call as those who have been filled with Spirit? We are called to always be looking, beyond these walls, into the holiness of all creation, called to ask, “Where is the Spirit?” And called to have the courage to join the Spirit’s work.

Thanks be to God for the gift of the Spirit: our companion, our helper, and our guide.

Amen

**Sending and benediction:**

Dear friends,

May we leave this place and know the Holy Spirit as a **wind**: as the soft cooling **breeze**, but also a source of **power**.

May we leave this place and know the Holy Spirit as **cloud**: as the life-promise of gentle **rain**, but also a storm that can **change and challenge our landscape**.

May we leave this place and know the Spirit as **fire**: as a comforting **warmth**, but also the force that **refines** us.

And as we follow the Spirit into this world that is beautiful and broken, and yet holy, may we go knowing that we are loved and held by God, Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of Life. Amen.

1. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/2/24/black-lives-matter-where-are-the-black-clergy> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/black-lives-matter-and-the-black-church> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://sites.google.com/view/ptcaraceandequity/assessment-report-may-2023> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)