

DAY OF PENEKOST – May 20th 2018

Blowin' in the Wind

(Acts 2:1-21)

A number of years ago, my family and I took a camping vacation out west. Our destination was Yellowstone National Park, which is in Wyoming, of course. But along the way, we took in some other sights as well, including Mount Rushmore in South Dakota.

As I remember it, we arrived late at night at the campground, which we had chosen because it was not *far* from Mount Rushmore. Unfortunately, however, there weren't too many sites left at that hour, so we had to pitch our tent out in a flat open field, as opposed to under the shade-providing trees on the hills bordering the field on either side.

The next day was sunny and clear – not too warm – and so we had a really nice time touring the monument and seeing those iconic granite sculptures of presidents George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln. Now the local weathercast that day, as I recall, indicated that there might be some late-afternoon showers. But we didn't see any signs of them. Rather, we were so impressed, in fact, that we decided to stay another night even and go back to Mount Rushmore to see it lit up by lights in the evening.

Back at camp, Jeanette and Kaitlin decided to take *their* showers first, which were located in a nice, sturdy, cement-block building nearby. Leaving our daughters Kristyn, Sarah, and *me* to get dinner started; which was going to be pretty simple – cans of Dinty Moore stew warmed up over the camping stove.

We were right in the middle of doing this when, all of a sudden, the sun disappeared, the sky turned an angry gray, and there came whipping across that open field – where our tent was pitched, remember – a “rushing,” *swooshing* sound, and then the powerful force of a violent wind.

One second, everything was calm and under control. And the very *next* second this howling wind came whipping across that field and completely flattened our tent for a brief moment – snapping the fiberglass poles that held it up like they were dry kindling. Moreover, that field – flanked as it was by those hills on either side – acted as something of a “funnel” for this powerful, violent wind as it rushed through the campground; ironically leaving the tents and campers up under the trees virtually untouched, while we frantically decided what to do next.

Well, I quickly glanced over at Kristyn and Sarah, and they stared back at me with these great big eyes – a look of shock and terrifying fear written across both of their faces – and, without saying a single word, we just started breaking our campsite down and throwing everything into the back of the van – the tent, our sleeping bags, the pots and pans (with the food still in them, mind you!), and everything else off the picnic table.

All the while, the wind just kept moaning and groaning, and whipping around us... I swear, I could almost hear Judy Garland crying out, “Auntie Em, Auntie Em!”

...Then, just as we were about finished throwing everything into the van – including partially warmed Dinty Moore stew which was splashing and flying all over the place – that violent wind suddenly stopped gusting just as quickly as it had started. And was replaced by an eerie calm; but as if there was perhaps more yet to come.

It was at that precise moment, that Jeanette and Kaitlin – who had been sheltered inside that cement-block shower facility the entire time, and therefore couldn’t see or hear what had just occurred – came running up, asking, “What happened?”

And I immediately replied, “I don’t know. But we’re getting out of here. NOW!” And so we did. Forget camping, I thought... at least

for *that* night! If that crazy, violent wind came back I didn't want to be anywhere *near it*, especially not stuck out in the open again...

The good news, however, was that when we finished packing up and drove into the closest town, we were actually able to find a hotel with a vacancy that late in the day. Not only *that*, but the only room they still had available was this big, fancy, bridal suite that they were willing to give us at half-price because it *was* so late in the day and it hadn't yet been reserved but was still sitting empty. So our three girls got to share the king-size bed, while Jeanette and I enjoyed the pullout couch. (Now I never did quite figure out why a bridal suite even *had* a pullout couch! And I don't think I even want to go there.)

Anyway, needless to say, we still got to enjoy Mount Rushmore again that evening under the lights, and then had a luxurious night's sleep; that is, after some of the best-tasting pizza we've ever had for dinner, which the kids told us was way better than Dinty Moore stew any day of the week!

All's well that ends well, as they say...

But the point here, I guess, is that those sudden high winds obviously necessitated a sudden change in our plans; a decision to break camp, drive into town, and get a hotel room for the evening instead of camping. A change that actually turned out even *better* for us in the end – at least the kids thought so. (Except for all that dried up Dinty Moore stew we had to clean up in the back of the van the next day, of course!)

...Well, according to our reading from Acts this morning, something very similar happened to the apostles on that first Pentecost. There they were... minding their own business, so to speak, when all of a sudden “there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind,” we're told, “and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.” (At least they weren't in an open field like we were, however!)

In other words, what we experienced out there in South Dakota, on our visit to Mount Rushmore, that's *exactly* the kind of wind we're talking about here on Pentecost; a sudden, violent, even terrifying, wind. I can even picture the disciples looking around at each other with great, big, eyes and saying, "Whoa! What's happening?" And then answering the question themselves. "I don't know. But I'm getting out of here!"

And so that's exactly what they did, scripture tells us. Just as Jesus had predicted, in fact (as recorded for us in Acts chapter one), they received "power" when the Holy Spirit came upon them in that violent wind, and also the tongues of fire that rested on each of their heads. And they then immediately went out to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and ultimately to the ends of the earth as well. Just as Jesus *said* they would.

You see, in order for them to fulfill their mission, for them to go out *into* the world with the gospel, the Holy Spirit, we are told, came *whipping* through that house like a violent wind – and literally *chased* them outside! A change in *their* plans as well, for sure. But one that *also* turned out to be even better in the end!

Up until this moment, you see, they had more or less been just "hanging out" there in Jerusalem. But now the power of the Holy Spirit, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, compelled them to go out into the world – scattered them, if you will – to share the good news...

Now the really cool thing here is that in the Bible the word for "spirit" comes from a root word which means "to breathe" or "to blow like the wind." The fundamental idea of spirit, therefore – in both Hebrew *and* Greek – is "breath," "air," "wind," or even "storm." It just depends on the context.

It may be a gentle breath, as in Genesis 2:7 where God *breathed* into Adam's nostrils the breath of life, and he became a human being. Or a light, cooling wind, as in Genesis 3:8 where God is walking through the

Garden of Eden “at the time of the evening *breeze*.” Or it can even be gale-force winds, like we have here in the Pentecost story, or also in Exodus 15:8 where God causing the waters of the Red Sea to part is described in this way, “At the blast of your nostrils (meaning God’s) the waters piled up, the floods stood up in a heap.”

Furthermore, the word “inspiration,” which, of course, is what happened to those disciples – soon to be known as apostles – is then itself *derived* from the word “spirit”; again, meaning to breathe or to blow. And it means to influence, or stimulate, or guide, or otherwise cause or motivate someone to do something. In this case, the Holy Spirit caused or motivated those apostles, the Holy Spirit “breathed” or “blew” into their lives – like the rush of a mighty wind, and *inspired* them to go out into the world to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

It’s a funny thing, though. You can’t really *see* the wind, can you? Oh, you can certainly *feel it*, of course. And sometimes, if it’s strong and powerful enough – as on that first Pentecost, or during our visit to Mount Rushmore years ago – you can also *hear it*, as well. But you can’t really see it.

Perhaps you may remember that Jesus once said, when a Pharisee named Nicodemus came to visit him one night, “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it goes.” So it is with the Holy Spirit, said Jesus, and “everyone who is *born* of the Spirit.”

Although, I’m not so sure about not being able to tell where the wind comes from or where it goes. Growing up here in Freehold, I could often tell if the wind had shifted directions – especially when signaling an approaching rainstorm – by its *smell*. All because of the Nescafe plant just outside of town. I don’t know if it’s still true, but back in the day, when the wind shifted a certain way, invariably signaling again an approaching rainstorm, you could actually *smell* coffee. In fact, to this day, whenever I smell coffee while I’m outdoors, I automatically look

up into the sky for rain clouds. It's like an automatic reflex, or something.

But, even so, the wind still pretty much goes where it pleases, though, doesn't it? And that's certainly true of the Holy Spirit as well. God's Spirit comes and goes where it pleases and touches people however it chooses. And it's not always the overpowering rush of a violent wind, either; the way it scattered those first apostles to the four corners of the earth with the gospel.

Sometimes the Spirit is more like a "gentle breeze," as I mentioned just a bit ago, that pulls and nudges you into action, as opposed to somehow *forcing* you into it. In fact, I have my own personal story of the Holy Spirit's influence and inspiration...

Back in 1969, the evangelist Billy Graham brought one of his famous crusades to New York City and Madison Square Garden. Here at Hope, we rented a bus and fifty or so people, including me – 13 years old at the time – rode up together to attend it.

Now if you ever experienced one of his crusades in person, or have seen one on television, they were filled with inspiring – in the truest sense of that word – truly inspiring music and personal testimonies, and then a powerful sermon from the late great Billy Graham himself. And this one, back in 1969, was no exception. Then, at the close of the evening's program, there was an altar call – in this case an invitation to come down to the floor of the arena to meet with a volunteer counselor from the New York area – and to make a personal decision for Christ.

Again, I was 13 years old at the time, and had been raised in the Lutheran church; in fact, I would be confirmed here at Hope the following spring. So I already *was* a Christian, baptized in May of 1956 when I was barely a month old.

Moreover, at that stage in my life, I was painfully shy. In other words, I was the very *last* person, out of those fifty or so who had come up from Freehold on that bus, that you would have predicted might answer that altar call and go down to talk with one of those volunteer counselors. But I did.

And to this day, I can't adequately explain what happened or why. All I recall is a gentle, tugging at my heart leading me down to the floor of that arena; a comforting, inviting, persuasive, and reassuring presence that I can only describe as the power of the Holy Spirit.

My godmother, my mom's sister, who was also in attendance that night always insisted thereafter that it was at this *precise* moment that I first received a call to ministry. I'm not so sure about that. But it certainly started me down a path that eventually *led* to seminary and ordination.

(Other people from our group, were *not* quite so happy with my decision to answer that altar call, however, and cause a 45-minute delay in our return trip to Freehold. But that's another story.)

Suffice it to say, that moment was for me a firsthand experience of the power of the Holy Spirit in a Christian's life. Again, of all people, I was the last person you would have expected to do what I did that night. Just as I was the very last person anyone who knew me back then would have *ever* expected to go on and become a pastor.

And so now, all these many years later, when I teach catechism and lead confirmation services (like this morning), I don't really worry if the young people aren't too sure or all that excited about what's happening. It doesn't even bother me when they fool around a little bit in class, or fail to pay attention at times. Why? Because I've been there... and done that. In fact, I was about the most stubborn, orneriest catechism student Pastor Al Gibson may have ever had in his long and illustrious career! I wasn't disrespectful, mind you. Unless, of course, you consider absolutely refusing to answer a single question in class for

the entire two years as being disrespectful! (Which, in retrospect, it probably was.)

Oh, I was bad. As I've shared before, Pastor Gibson would ask me a question, and I would just sit there, not saying a thing. So he would wait for me to respond... which I *wouldn't*. So he would wait some more. And soon it would turn into a battle of wills. Me, refusing to answer. Him, not going on with the class *until* I answered. The minutes would slowly tick by as two stubborn individuals absolutely refused to budge.

Finally, when the tension became too great, and too much time had passed, Marti Gibson – the pastor's daughter – would inevitably blurt out the correct answer (she always knew it; after all, she *was* the pastor's daughter!), thereby getting both her father *and* me off the hook, so to speak. Until the *next* time he asked me a question, that is.

I thought I was being so clever; refusing to answer any questions and trying to avoid learning anything at all. I sure fooled Pastor Gibson!

But look at me now. Who had the last laugh? Maybe Al Gibson, I guess. But the Holy Spirit had the last laugh, if you ask me. And the Holy Spirit will have the last laugh in *each* of our lives, as well.

Whether it's through the rush of a violent wind, or a gentle, inviting breeze – the Holy Spirit will eventually breathe new life into each of us. Of that much, I'm absolutely certain.

I don't know when. And I don't know how. But the Holy Spirit will touch and captivate each of our lives before all is said and done. Just wait and see...

Now I certainly don't have all the answers to life's most difficult questions. And I don't know how all the nonsense and sadness of our crazy, mixed-up world is ever going to be resolved.

How can we go on after yet another school shooting? Another senseless tragedy...

But this much I *do* know. Just as Bob Dylan once sang, “The answer, my friend, is blowin’ in the wind... The *answer* is blowin’ in the wind.

The answer is in the Holy Spirit, continuously blowing into our lives in so many different ways. But always with the same effect. The Holy Spirit never stops changing lives for the better. And, most of all, giving us the breath of *new* life in Jesus Christ.

Amen.

"Blowin' In The Wind"

How many roads must a man walk down
Before you call him a man?
How many seas must a white dove sail
Before she sleeps in the sand?
Yes, and how many times must the cannonballs fly
Before they're forever banned?

The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind

Yes, and how many years can a mountain exist
Before it's washed to the sea?
Yes, and how many years can some people exist
Before they're allowed to be free?
Yes, and how many times can a man turn his head
And pretending that he just doesn't see?

The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind

Yes, and how many times must a man look up
Before he can see the sky?
Yes, and how many ears must one man have
Before he can hear people cry?
Yes, and how many deaths will it take 'til he knows
That too many people have died?

The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind