

## A MIGHTY WIND

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo  
Union Church of Pocantico Hills  
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Acts 2:1-21

There is a dangerous side to God. It has nothing to do with judgment and everything to do with God's creativity. At Pentecost we remember God's passion for blowing away our safe plans.

The real beginning of the Pentecost story comes in the very first chapter of the Bible: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was without form and void; and darkness covered the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters."<sup>1</sup> The word for spirit in the Hebrew is "*ruach*." The same word can also be translated as "mighty wind." Some of our contemporary translations say, "A wind from God swept over the face of the waters." It is to say the same thing. The Holy Spirit is a mighty wind that moves across the dark chaos that has settled in, pushes it aside, and creates life in its place.

Later in the Old Testament, that same wind appears again blowing across the Red Sea, splitting it in half, and making a way for the Hebrews to leave slavery. Then they begin the journey to a new life in the Promised Land. Much later, the mighty wind reappears rushing across Ezekiel's valley of dry bones, bringing them back to life with God's breath.

On the day of Pentecost, as we heard in this morning's lesson, the disciples were huddled together in the sanctuary of their upper room, and suddenly a violent wind from heaven appeared—inside the house. Don't you think these good Hebrews knew something was up? They had heard all of the biblical stories about the great *ruach* wind called Spirit. They knew about creation, the Red Sea, and Ezekiel's valley of dry bones being brought back to life. So when all of a sudden they were being tossed around by a powerful wind, they knew that God was at work with the gift of life.

The question is, do you know that? When the winds of change sweep through your family, your community, your life, do you know what it means? When your safe plans are blown out the door, and when you are forced to move into a strange future that you had not planned, do you realize that this may be the Spirit of God who insists on leading you to a new life?

The question has a particular poignancy as we near our third month of pandemic. In the world that was before Covid-19, it seemed sometimes that life could be harsh. So many of us faced relentless schedules and pressing demands. Like the first disciples who nestled together in their familiar upper room, we, too, looked for places of sanctuary. Someplace where we could be safe, where we could let down our guard, and where we could find refuge in the familiar and predictable. For many of us, home was that that sanctuary. After an exhausting day of work surrounded by wolves and snakes, it felt good

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1:1.

to come home where you didn't have to be defensive and could shut the door on your problems. For others, church may have been your sanctuary—where you were free to rest your weary soul and find inspiration in music and carefully spoken words and the warm embraces of your fellow parishioners.

But now, the virus has rained havoc on our favorite sanctuaries. When you are stuck at home for months on end, it can seem less a sanctuary than a prison. And our comfortable way of having church together has been completely upset, too. We thank God for the miracles of technology that allow us to continue to meet and worship virtually, but it certainly isn't the same. We miss hugs and singing together in our lovely church and casual conversation during coffee hour. Zoom just isn't the same sort of sanctuary.

It is tempting in this time of upheaval to imagine that there is a sanctuary to be found in life “getting back to normal.” If we could just reopen the church and reopen the economy, everything would be alright. We could resume our comfortable routines and reestablish the sanctuaries we have relied upon for so long. But the truth, there is no going back. We are going to be living with this threat to our public health for the foreseeable future, and we need to adapt—be willing to change—if we are going to take care of one another and live to rebuild another day.

The last words the risen Christ spoke to the disciples before he ascended into heaven were to promise that the Holy *Ruach* of God would come upon them. Then they would have the power to fulfill their mission in life. And ten days later, at Pentecost, as the disciples were hiding in their safe upper room, the wind rushed down upon them and blew them out of their sanctuary into the waiting world.

Sanctuaries are good places. We need them to find rest and the renewal of vision. But whenever we use our safe place to resist change, the sanctuary becomes a tomb. Things that do not change are dead, including our lives. But you can stop living long before you die. All you have to do is to retreat into how it used to be. But your retreat is then a tomb. Jesus doesn't care much for tombs. He didn't even stay in his own for long, so don't expect to find him in yours. Expect him to send his Spirit to breathe life back into you by pushing you to a new place where you can only live by faith, which is the only way to be fully alive.

Now, I am not suggesting that the Holy Spirit has somehow *caused* the pandemic in order to push us into a more faithful way of living. But it seems very plausible to me that the Holy Spirit is taking advantage of this crisis to prod all of us disciples of Christ out of our safe places in order to follow the risen Savior who is always at work in the world, doing new things. For where he is, there is our life and our freedom.

I believe God loves us too much to let us dry up with anxiety about our own lives—neither as individuals nor as a community of faith. I believe that just as the *ruach* blew life into the old Hebrew festival of the Harvest, reminding them of the goodness of a God who provides, and just as that mighty wind transformed frightened disciples into bold apostles who were seized with a passion for their mission in life, so is there a mighty wind blowing across our lives. It is the creative Spirit of God.

It may not be welcomed at first. This wind may push us far from the places we would prefer to be. And it may feel at first as confusing and disruptive as it did at the first Pentecost. It may begin with the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, the failure of a dream, or an unsettlingly long spell of isolation due to the virus. It may pull you away from people you love. But if this wind has come from heaven, it is only meant to carry you to the place God has dreamed for you—the place where you will be able to do what you were created to do.

In that mission you will find your life. It won't be easy; it never is. It will cost a lot; it always does. And it will be risky. If it is safety you want, get a tomb. But if you want to be fully alive, then follow the wind.

All authority and power and dominion to the name that is above all names—Jesus Christ our Lord—now and in the age to come. Amen.