

Gentle Breezes, Stinging Winds

Pentecost sermon by John Strommen on Acts 2:1-21 May 20, 2018

I was in high school attending a Christian camp in Colorado. There were 10 of us or so sitting in the back of an open air Chevy Blazer pick up, gazing nervously up to where the road was about to lead us - high up, far above the tree line. The jeep driver then offered a brief devotional to calm our nerves: "As the Lord tells us in the good book, 'Lo, I am with you always...but high, and you're on your own.'"

Now that's what you call a mixed message.

These words, of course, were Jesus' last words to his disciples, according to St. Matthew. Just the "I am with you always" part, though. Clearly this was intended to reassure, but then Jesus disappeared into heaven. And there you have the original mixed message! How was he supposed to always be with them *when he just left them?*

Pentecost! That's how. Jesus remains with us by the power of the Holy Spirit, God's presence and power poured out on all flesh! And so God's embodiment in Jesus is not temporary. It is permanent by the power of the Holy Spirit. It takes residence in you and me.

And so, one morning, as Jesus' followers were no doubt wondering how they were going to carry on without Jesus, a strong wind blew in, and they were suddenly filled with the Holy Spirit. Then things got strange: for starters, the very first Christians were sporting tongues fire upon their heads, and the words coming out of their mouths were somehow immediately translated into the many tongues of the international crowd that was listening. The disciples themselves were having so much fun with this ecstatic experience that the people watching thought they were drunk, and in a way, they were: drunk on the Holy Spirit.

At any rate, Peter heard the murmuring about their drunkenness and seemed to take offense. "What kind of "low-lives" do you think we are? We weren't drinking. It's only 9 o'clock in the morning. As God said in the book of Joel, 'I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh and your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.'"

So Jesus was right! He *will* be with us. The Holy Spirit is part of the Triune God and those three are tight! In fact, they are in a continual dynamic interplay. So when you get the Holy Spirit, you get Jesus, too - whether you're high or low - and you become a part of the interplay, the community, the dance of God. No wonder they seemed a bit drunk! Plus they had dreams, visions and prophecies to share, fully airborne in these winds of promise.

This is no less true for us, and yet as somewhat reserved Lutherans, we may think this wild Holy Spirit stuff is not for us, that the Holy Spirit is the province of Christians who go overboard and either get weird or pushy. Not true. At the most basic level, the Holy Spirit that God gives is God's life force that is at once fully present and fully promise. Such truth feels good and brings joy in our earthly, embodied selves!

What gives you exhilaration and joy? When do you feel most alive and able to dream about the future?

Eric Liddle was a Scottish Olympian in 1922 and a devout Christian. His running was an extension of his faith, but it was more than that. His running was an ecstatic expression of the Holy Spirit in his members, and when he ran, he would “feel God’s pleasure.”

(film clip)

When I picture Jesus’ followers on the day of Pentecost, I’ll bet they looked like Eric Liddle, so joyful they appeared to be drunk – or high on something. This image is important, because often we are too serious about our religion. We must be reminded that God didn’t come down to us, become a human being, and pour out his spirit to *chastise us and browbeat us*. God came to us that we might live and experience joy, even joyful play! Think of when life is most satisfying and you are fully immersed and alive, when time passes and you hardly knew it because you were lost in the gift of life. Such is the character of God’s Holy Spirit loose in your life!

Or think of the many more subtle moments, when you embrace the simpler pleasures of life, like your daily bread, your gifts and passions, the people dearest to you. The Holy Spirit here is like a cool, gentle breeze on a hot summer day.

But the Holy Spirit is not always a cool, gentle breeze as we feel God’s pleasure.

Back when I was a church youth director in my twenties, my youth group and I spent the day at Great Sand Dunes National Park in Colorado. We were there for a mission trip but had a few days to play. So here are these towering sand dunes, formed by a mighty wind tunnel passing over a mountain range. On this particular day, though, the wind was gentle and reassuring, and as we romped around and played in these dunes, we had experienced our own version of Pentecost ecstasy. I mean, it’s a bit like being caught up in a childhood fantasy. There we were in the largest sandbox in the world with no parents around. We buried each other in the sand, did flips and somersaults. We did long jumps and ran sprints down tidal waves of sand, laughing hysterically and then wiping out ferociously at the bottom. We didn’t have any flames on our heads, but some of our yelps and whoops may have been an inspired language.

But underneath our giddiness, there was an unmistakable reverence, because it felt like some sort of divine vision of play. When I suggested we get in a circle to pray, there were no groans or pleas to do it later. It was more like, “yeah, if there ever was a time and place to pray, this is it.”

So we took turns praying. I was going to say the last prayer, and as I sat listening to others thank God for the sandbox, I felt a gentle, steady breeze that seemed like a caress. Then one of those lightbulbs turned on in my head that pastors get, and I thought to myself, “Hey, the wind is like the Holy Spirit, gentle and loving. What a great object lesson! When it’s my turn to pray, that’s what I’m going to say!” So I sat waiting to pray my wonderful prayer, but as I sat, the wind picked up about four notches. Now the Holy Spirit was turning grains of sand into little projectiles, causing everyone to cower and cringe. “Oh great, I

thought. There goes my little prayer/sermon. What do I say now? Feel the Holy Spirit as it drives sand into your face!" So I shouted a quick non-specific prayer over the wind, and we left. Our day of Pentecost had ended.

It wasn't until later than night that I realized that the wind with the stinging grains of sand is the Holy Spirit, too. Geographically speaking, the wind created the sand dunes and continually shapes and rearranges them according to nature's purpose. One thing's for sure, the dunes cannot be created by gentle breezes alone, but by fierce wind.

So, too, does God's Holy Spirit work to rearrange the landscape of our world because this world is not always conducive to love and to hope and to justice, and must therefore be sculpted by God, recreated. The work of the Holy Spirit in this world is to work through us to create connections and community with people who need a shared sense of humanity and purpose. Our work is to create the conditions for love and for hope and for justice, whether it's simply forming relationships with our neighbors, like we see during the plant sale, for instance, or whether it's working together with our neighbors to create safer communities. And when those more biting winds come our way, it is always a loving push or nudge to join with God to make the world a better place, maybe by doing something that is not entirely comfortable to you, meeting new people, challenging the status quo. Change is not comfortable, and never comes without risks.

When my youth group spent a week in one of the poorest counties in the nation, this was not comfortable. Knowing the unemployment rate was higher than the *employment* rate was not comfortable. Yet the winds of the Holy Spirit drove us together with these dear people from San Luis County, and the Holy Spirit reminded us through the San Luis residents that we were all one people in Christ.

Where is the Holy Spirit blowing us at Mt Carmel? To whom? I guarantee you it's not just to each other. It never is.

May the winds of the Holy Spirit blow within you and make you joyful. May those same winds blow within you, unsettle you, and move you to engagement with those whom the Lord is calling you to. Amen.