

Sermon: Pentecost Sunday, May 28, 2023. Acts 2: 1-21 and John 20: 19-23
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church – Rev Greg Wooley. Preached in Banff.

This has been an unusual Pentecost Sunday to prepare for. And no, not because of the back and forth on whether we'd be in Banff or Canmore, but because of *that other thing*.

Rev Dr Catherine MacLean, Minister at St Paul's United in Edmonton and one of my predecessors at Ralph Connor Canmore, wrote a prayer of lament a couple of weeks ago, which began with these words: "Holy One, we anticipate Pentecost and the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Haloes of flame resting upon the apostles, and we prepare for exuberance: red preaching stoles, flame coloured-clothing, Pentecost shoes, birthday cake with icing images of the Spirit's fire. And yet, this year we put aside these images of fire". She then went on to detail the connection between this year's wildfires with prior traumatic fires in Fort McMurray and Slave Lake and the Tl'Kemstin First Nation and adjacent town of Lytton BC.

A week ago, when we looked out our windows and could not even see the *outlines* of mountains due to the smoke, this connection between the first Christian Pentecost with its descriptions of the Holy Spirit rushing like wind and resting on the believers "as of tongues of flame" and news of recent Alberta wildfires threatening people, wildlife and livestock gave me pause. We also recall, as Catherine did later in her prayer, what it was like ten years ago locally, to experience the power of floodwaters that displaced people, destroyed houses, and twisted railway lines like corkscrews. Wind and Water are very different in the *type* of power they exercise, but when one experiences the sheer forcefulness of nature it leaves a substantial imprint.

Whatever we do in Church life, in our Worship and the way we use our buildings and our choice of special events, always happens in the context of the joys and challenges of people's lives, the things that bring them hope, the traumas that block their joy. God is profoundly involved in our highs and lows, the mundane and predictable as well as the wobbly and the mercurial, and we as Church must mirror this concern. So on this day when we *are* wearing our oranges and reds and yellows, we do so knowing that there are still more than 50 wildfires burning in this province, and our prayers reach out to those for whom images of wind and flame are not celebrative and will not be used anytime soon. Pause with me, to lift up the lives of those impacted by these dramatic, frightening forces...

Without losing contact with those present realities, today we do revisit the first Christian Pentecost. Pentecost was the Greek word for "Fiftieth" and was the Greek name for for the Jewish festival of Shavuot, which happened on the fiftieth day after Passover. On this day of celebration the Jewish faithful from many nations had come to Jerusalem.

Amongst them, were the Jewish disciples of Jesus. For them, the fifty days after Passover was overshadowed by the death and resurrection of Jesus, also fifty days prior. And as the disciples gathered, two things happened: the Holy Spirit settled things down and stirred things up.

The past two Sundays, we have revisited the space of the disciples as they heard Jesus' farewell discourses. Gathered in the Upper Room with Jesus, hours before his crucifixion, they, then, like we, today, would share bread and cup with Jesus, under direction by their Lord to remember him. In that anxious space, Jesus made sure that they knew that his going away from them did not equal God's abandoning of them. In his absence, God would make sure that they were not alone: an advocate, a comforter, a companion, the Holy Spirit would come to them. And, although remembered differently by John and Luke/Acts, the Holy

Spirit DID come to them – breathed on the disciples by the risen Christ later on Easter Day, according to the gospel of John, or descending on them like wind and flame at the festival of Pentecost, giving them new abilities to HEAR one another, according to the Book of Acts.

The Spirit was given, for them to have a sense of solidity, wise counsel and guidance. This Spirit would hold them together but would also embolden them to push for justice in the world, knowing that God “had their back”. As Marcus Borg pointed out, as early as the 2nd century, Christians identified this Spirit with the Sophia or “holy Wisdom” personified in the 8th chapter of Proverbs, a feminine expression of sacred seeking of justice and truth.

So, whether the Spirit came into their midst on Easter evening, as per John, or fifty days later, as per the book of Acts, the Spirit WAS given and assured the disciples that God was with them. The Spirit would hold them together as Jesus had held them together, the Spirit would lead them to truth as Jesus had, the Spirit would encourage them to reach out as healers in Jesus’ name just as they had been empowered do in Galilee, two by two, preparing the way for Jesus.

And at the same time that the Spirit would comfort them, unify them, settle them, the Spirit would also stir things up! The 2nd chapter of Acts (2:2-4, CEB) does a great job of picking up on that: “Suddenly a sound from heaven like the howling of a fierce wind filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be individual flames of fire alighting on each one of them. ⁴ They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak”. The howling of a fierce wind, individual flames, a holy cacophony of languages; how exciting! how confusing!

As much as the Holy Spirit can be a wonderful comfort, my experience more often is that when we are “of the Spirit” and open to her ways, things do get blown around! Preconceptions get exploded, prejudices are brought into the spotlight, easy acceptance of injustice gets revealed and confronted. A couple of days ago, Jeff Campney sent me an article entitled, “Pentecost is the Memorial of Divine Noise” and that is so true – when the Spirit shows up, things might get noisy and yet, the Spirit helps us hear one another more clearly amidst the chaos. (This seems as good a time as any to remind everyone to GO VOTE TOMORROW, and to pray for respectfulness in this final day of campaigning!)

When the disciples of Jesus received the Holy Spirit, things got settled down and stirred up all at once, and it’s been like that ever since. Nearly ten years ago, the United Church of Canada first proposed an initiative to support new ventures, through funding and knowledge and creative community. The final name of this program, which we have benefitted from more than once, is “Embracing the Spirit.” When it was first proposed, though, its working title was “Chasing the Spirit”, a phrase I preferred.

If we take those two terms together – embracing and chasing – the twofold nature of a Holy Spirit that both settles things down and stirs them up is evident. We embrace and are embraced by The Spirit as we find new, relevant points of connection with the communities around us; and at the same time, there are times that the Spirit runs ahead of us and we breathlessly try to keep up to her, chasing the playful and unpredictable wind of the Spirit as new plans we had not imagined lunge us into service.

In many Churches in this province, this will be a less boisterous Pentecost than usual, as lively images and splashes of colour and celebrations of the Church’s birthday get set aside, as worrisome smoke reminds them and us of the precarious balances of nature. Yet even as we do that, we have gratitude that the Spirit DID show up at Pentecost and continues to do

so: to hold us and to push us, to make us feel both safe and restless, to enjoy our togetherness as a Community of Faith and to keep turning our attention beyond ourselves. For all that the Spirit does for us, with us, between us and around us, we give our thanks and praise. Amen.

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