

# *The Sunnybrook Pulpit*

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May 31, 2020 – Pentecost Sunday

## **Waiting for Wind**

In his message, our minister offers an informed but personal interpretation of a passage from the Bible. This interpretation is intended to assist, not replace, our own creative engagement with the Bible as a means through which God may be communicating with us.

### **Acts 2:1-21**

During the festival of Pentecost, the early Christians are able to communicate with people who have gathered from all over the Roman empire. The point here is that the early Christian community was breaking down the barriers of race, language, ethnicity,

### **Ezekiel 37:1-11**

*During the Babylonian Exile had many questions: “Why has this happened to us? Why didn’t God protect us? Can’t God protect us? Is God real?” Such questions led to a profound loss of hope. They were giving up. Ezekiel heard them observe, “Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone, there’s nothing left of us.” Ezekiel heard that, and then he had a vision.*

Many of you know that I love to sail. Sailing deploys a large piece of fabric – carbon fibre and Kevlar reinforced mylar are the high tech fabrics of choice these days, but Dacron is much cheaper and in ancient times, cotton, hemp and other natural fabrics were used. But a large piece of fabric in a wind will behave just like a sheet flapping in the wind unless you can harness it using ropes (lines), masts and spars.

I use this sail when I go windsurfing. When the wind is blowing, it pushes out the inside of the sail, and the wind flows over it like over the wing of a bird or an airplane.. At times using this sail is a bit like flying.

In the right wind, I can lean back, and the wind will hold me up, the board will rise out of the water and plane across the surface so fast that it is like riding a skipping stone. It is really, really fun.

There are times when the wind isn’t strong enough and I am barely moving at all, and there are times when the wind is too strong, and I can’t control this sail. Once, I was at Gull Lake, and the wind was so strong that it picked up this sail and blew it 50 yards into some bushes and I had to go and pick it out of a tree. I brought it back to the beach, but the wind picked it up again and blew it away again. I gave up trying to go sailing that day.

Air is around us all the time, and most of the time we don’t even notice it, so it is easy to forget how powerful it can be. A strong wind, like in a tornado or a hurricane, can rip the shingles or siding off a house, it can turn signs into flying missiles. Sometimes a tornado will pick up a

building, like in the Wizard of Oz, and drop it somewhere far away. Sometimes a hurricane will devastate a whole city. Wind is powerful.

The Bible was originally written mostly in two ancient languages: Hebrew and Greek. There is a bit of Aramaic as well, but mostly Hebrew and Greek. And in both of those languages, the words for wind, breath and Spirit are the same words: *ruach* in Hebrew and *pneuma* in Greek. Wind and breath are like God's Spirit. We can't see them, but they are all around us; they are even a part of us.

The two stories that we remember this morning tell us that God's Spirit is powerful, like the wind. Even though we can't see it, God's Spirit can enliven our lifeless bones and make us dance. Most of the time we take it for granted, but sometimes, God's spirit will blow through a community of faith and change us, even when we don't want to change. "The wind blows where it wants," says the Bible; "the Spirit blows where it wants, and you do not know where it comes from or where it goes."

The reading from Ezekiel was a response to those who had lost hope and felt their bones were dry. The passage says that even when it seems all hope is lost, there is one who is the source of our hope, who has the power to breathe life into our dry bones, just like a pinwheel is set to life by a puff of breath. I think we all have times when we have lost hope and our bones are dry. Lots of people are feeling like that right now because of how restricted our lives have become. And some of us are thinking that this might be all we have for the rest of our lives. Your hope is gone, your bones are dry.

But this can happen to anyone at any time, whenever we feel hopeless. Recently Therese and I have been enjoying the of the Netflix show called *The Crown*, a historical drama based on the life of Queen Elizabeth II and her family. In one episode, the story is told of Prince Philip having a mid-life crisis in 1969 just as the first astronauts are landing on the moon. His hope is gone, his bones are dry. He comes to realize that his life feels just as desolate and lifeless as the surface of the moon. At the same time, the Anglican priest who serves at Windsor Castle has begun holding retreats for other priests going through mid-life struggles. At first Prince Philip is contemptuous of these other men, seeing them as weak and pathetic. Eventually, he comes to realize that their struggles are very similar to his own, and he asks for their help. And it is at that point that he begins to heal.

Many of us have those kinds of experiences. Perhaps it is in a relationship; perhaps you have given up hoping for a better relationship with your spouse, a child, a parent or a friend. Perhaps if you are really honest with yourself, you long for things to be better, but you have given up trying to make things better.

Perhaps it is at work or at school or at church or in your neighborhood. Perhaps if you are really honest with yourself, you long for things to be different, but you aren't sure what to do to make them different. Your hope is gone, your bones are dry.

Perhaps it is in our public life; perhaps you despair that the public seems so uninterested in really important issues and so easily distracted by trivial ones. Perhaps you aren't much impressed with politicians or the political system. Perhaps if you are really honest with yourself, you long for things to be better, but your bones are dry and your hope is gone.

Let me tell you that sometimes God surprises us, that even when change seems impossible, God breathes life into our hopes again.

Sometimes the wind starts to blow. But things don't change in a gentle breeze. Sometimes it takes a real storm to move things around. And sometimes it can be terrifying and chaotic when the wind really starts to move. Sometimes it can blow us to places we would not have expected or chosen, that we fight tooth and nail to avoid. And sometimes it is only later that we realize that it was the Spirit who blew us there.

Nearly thirty years ago, I thought I was done being a minister. I went to graduate school. My goal was to become a professor of Ethics. Things didn't work out that way. I hated graduate school. I was sick, was diagnosed with Crohn's Disease, so I finished my Master's Degree and moved to central Alberta and went back to being a minister. But I didn't really go back. I went forward. Because in the past ministry had always been something I was doing on the way somewhere else. It wasn't until my goals were abandoned that I really saw ministry as my life calling. And that changed everything. It wasn't what I would have chosen two years earlier, but it was great. Was I blown here by the Spirit? It's hard to answer that question for sure, but I think so.

Is it in the things we enjoy, the friendships and support and care we experience, the cookies after church, and the wonderful music and spiritual nurture? Those are all ways the Spirit works, for sure. But perhaps the Spirit is also at work in the things we don't enjoy: the sermon or statement that raises our hackles and challenges long held notions, but that make us think in new ways, the conflicts and struggles that force us to face things we would rather not face. The Spirit of God, someone once said, comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. And as the song says, the Spirit is a spirit of gentleness and a spirit of restlessness, which sometimes whispers in silence and sometimes stings with the sand.

Among the most challenging ways in which the Spirit of God is making us restless these days is in raising up and making visible the racial and ethnic tensions that are often invisible to those of us who are part of the dominant group. This week, a black man named Floyd George died in Minneapolis after a policeman knelt on his neck for nine minutes while arresting him for allegedly passing a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill. A cell phone video shows him repeatedly pleading, "I can't breath" before he loses consciousness. The police officer has been charged with murder, but this kind of thing happens so frequently in the United States that it has touched off a long-simmering anger and the riots, looting and arson that have followed in Minneapolis have spread to other cities. The restlessness of African-American people about the daily indignities and injustices inflicted on them is also the restlessness of God's Spirit.

The festival of Pentecost is partly about the healing of ethnic and racial tensions. In the story of the first Pentecost, people from all over the world gather in Jerusalem for an agricultural festival. The list of places they come from is so long that most readers cringe at having to read that story. You can imagine that the differences between them go way beyond the places they come from. The variety of languages and cultures and skin tones and cuisines and customs and worldviews would be astonishing. The tensions among them would be many and various. At any moment you could imagine arguments and fistfights could break out.

But when the wind and fires of the Spirit begin to move, those tensions and conflicts are all brought into community. Each of the cultural and ethnic and linguistic groups hears the gospel spoken in their own language and their own culture. The differences are not erased, but honoured. They do not all have to learn Hebrew before they can hear the good news of God's love. The early church is not a melting pot in which differences are erased but a multicultural, multilingual, intercultural community.

The story of that intercultural community has lessons for us in the modern world. In the face of interracial and interethnic tensions, God's Spirit does not force everyone into the mold of the dominant language and culture, but honours each language and culture and brings the tensions and conflicts between them into relationship so that we can all learn from each other.

One of the best books I have ever read is *Braiding Sweetgrass*, by an indigenous scientist named Robin Wall Kimmerer, who comes from Potawatomi nation in upper New York State. One of the stories she tells is about her own indigenous language of Potawatomi, which she had not learned as a child, because it had been stripped from her grandparents in residential school (apparently those who ran residential schools had not grasped the meaning of the story of Pentecost). So Kimmerer's first language was English, and until she was middle-aged she knew more Latin than she knew of the indigenous language of her people. But eventually, she realized that there were only six people in the world who still spoke Potawatomi fluently, and they were all in their eighties. She decided that she had to start learning Potawatomi. One of the things she discovered was that learning this new language helped her to see the world differently. Because while English is 70% nouns, Potawatomi is 70% verbs. What in English are things, are because they are verbs are often alive in indigenous languages. A river in English is best translated as "to be a river" or "to river" in Potawatomi. The language carries a worldview that sees the world as animate and alive. "It's no wonder that our language was forbidden," Kimmerer writes. "The language we speak is an affront to ... the fundamental tenets of Western thinking—that humans alone are possessed of rights and all the rest of the living world exists for human use. Those whom my ancestors called relatives were renamed *natural resources*." [in *Orion Magazine*, March/April 2017, <https://orionmagazine.org/article/speaking-of-nature/>]

To lose a language means to lose that way of seeing the world. But to honour and respect different languages and cultures means that the richness of these different ways of seeing the world are brought into community so that we can learn from them.

The Spirit of restlessness does not erase or suppress our differences but brings them into a community in which we can engage the tensions and conflicts creatively, constructively and respectfully.

Are there ways that we avoid the Spirit's power, take the wind out of our sails? If there is one thing that keeps us from experiencing the power of the Spirit, I think it is our desire for safety. Tensions and conflicts are scary, so we are tempted to suppress them. So the Spirit is dangerous, like a strong thunderstorm, like a tornado or a hurricane. What would happen if we didn't run for cover every time it starts to blow?

If you are on our email list, you should have received a pattern for a pinwheel with your bulletins. I want to encourage you to use it to make your own pinwheel, colour it or decorate it and play with it a little bit. You take the pattern and cut it out, then you cut along the dotted lines from the outside, but you stop cutting before you get to the circle in the middle. Then you take a pin or a tack or a toothpick or something and punch it from the back through each of the holes in the corners and then through the centre, and finally through a straw, and presto, you have a pinwheel. When you blow on it, your breath will turn the wheel. It is a reminder of the power of the wind.

What I think is cool about pinwheels is that they let the wind move them. A giant wind turbine or a sail will do the same thing. If you get the angles of the blades just right, when the wind passes over them, it will spin faster than you can imagine, and the power of the wind is harnessed. What would our lives be like if we let the Spirit of God, the Wind of God move us?

When I get out on my windsurfer, when it gets really fun – and to be honest a little terrifying, which is kind of the same thing – when it gets really fun is when the wind is blowing so hard that I'm not quite sure I can control it. I get out there, and I put my sail up. I can't control the wind, but I can control the sail, and when the sail is set right, the power of the wind will move me in powerful ways. In the same way, there are a lot of things we can't control right now – but let's be honest: there are always a lot of things we can't control. But when we set our spiritual sails right, when we pay attention to the way the wind and Spirit of God is blowing, then we can draw on the power of the Spirit, and trust me, the power of that Spirit will be awesome to behold! Amen!