

“When the Spirit Blows”  
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby  
Central Presbyterian Church  
June 4, 2006  
Pentecost  
Scripture: Acts 2:1-21

Some families have a tradition, on each birthday, to tell the story of exactly how it happened that you came to be born. As the family is sitting at the table over birthday cake, or, if you are far away, a parent gets on the phone and retells what happened on that first day of your life. The story might begin like this:

We were so excited about being pregnant. We spent those nine months getting a bedroom ready for you, going to parenting classes, and studying books of names for babies. Then, in the middle of the night, I realized that it was time to get to the hospital and fast. Three hours later, you were born on this very day at 4:18 in the morning. Happy birthday.

In the annual retelling of your birth you discover that there is something about that story of your birthday that informs and inspires how you are to live. That you were loved and expected and worthy of a story told and retold with love. The story moves in all directions of time, linking the distant past with the present, and extending into the future, informing and confirming your identity.

The same is true for the church. Every Pentecost, the so-called birthday of the church, we gather together to hear a story about how it all began. Like most good stories, this one should be heard as if we ourselves were in that very room. For there, on that first Pentecost, the disciples were together in one place, and suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where we were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among us, and a tongue rested on each of us. And then we began to speak in other languages, and others approached, because they heard us speaking in each of our native languages.<sup>1</sup> The book of Acts lists the background of those who were there: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs – in their own languages they spoke about God’s deeds of power and could be understood.

Do you remember the story of the tower of Babel from Genesis? Our human ancestors, back when we all spoke the same language, were filled with pride and folly and thought we could control everything. So we built a tower, reaching up into the sky – and God saw through our foolish ways, and to remind us demolished the tower and scattered us humans throughout the world, and gave us different languages. On Pentecost, the story is reversed - people from around the world come together, still speaking a diversity of languages, but coming together not to control God but to worship.

These biblical stories connect the church to its past and inform our future. Here, people of different places and languages come back together. I am not sure whether there are any Parthians, Medes, or Elamites present, but here Norwegians and Swedes, Ghanaians and Kenyans, Koreans and Rwandans, Indians and Canadians, people who speak French and English and Spanish come together to worship the God who created us all and calls us all to love and serve one another and all creation.

What happened? Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and the church was born.

The word, Spirit, is related in the biblical languages to breath, to wind, to the animating force that brings life to being. When the Spirit of God blows, things happen. There they were, sitting in the room, and suddenly the Spirit blew through them, and they were able to really hear and understand each other. When the Spirit blows, watch out! Powerful things are about to happen.

I spent last week backpacking in a desert canyon. And one night the wind came up and blew through our tent. Let me confess that I am not the bravest person in the world. When I am camping, I hear noises and assume that they are wild animals prowling nearby, hunting for our food supply or worse yet – hunting for us. But on this night, it was the wind howling. Shaking our tent, pouring desert sand into our faces and almost lifting the corners of the tent up. And as I lay there scared and uncomfortable during that night, I thought of this story of Pentecost and the arrival of the Spirit with the sound of a violent wind.

As I lay there in my tent, trying to be as heavy as I could be, I realized that there are two basic responses when the Spirit blows. You can try to batten down the hatches, like preparing for a hurricane, or a desert wind. Tying everything down, boarding up the windows, keeping out the winds that threaten to change or destroy.

The second basic response is to trust in God's Spirit, even when it sounds like a violent storm, and to become more like a kite – willing to go where the spirit leads. Willing to explore new possibilities and new areas as the wind directs. Instead of looking for boards to nail up, this approach calls for finding kite strings, and watching the soaring birds and butterflies for direction.

When the Spirit blows, things are about to happen. That is what this day is all about – a day we recall that our ancestors were brave enough to set sail on that Pentecost wind that blew into their room and changed everything. Instead of creating boundaries and walls between cultures, religion became a way to understand each other despite dramatic differences. Religion became a way to appreciate rather than fear diversity. The Spirit gave the church courage to go out into the entire world, remembering the teachings of Jesus, and his power that came in humble acts of justice and mercy and love.

When the Spirit blows, big things happen. And the Spirit is blowing again today. As we welcome a confirmation class of some of the neatest youth imaginable. As we gather in this

building built in the 1880s, a long time ago in a city that looked quite different, and as we get set to sail with the Spirit into the future.

When the Spirit blows, we get connected again to God's power, God's gift of life and breath and hope. Back in the beginning, the Bible says, when the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, a wind from God, or God's spirit itself swept over the face of the waters. And then God said, let there be light, and the process of creation began (Gen 1:1-3). When the Spirit blows, God's creative powers are at work, calling into being new creation.

And the Spirit blows over the baptismal water again today, calling into being a new community, one in which Wilson and Joshua and Andrea hear their names called again, but in a new way. The Spirit is blowing. And we don't know for sure where the Spirit will lead us. Let me make this clear, baptism is no promise that life will be easy, or that everything will always make sense. In fact, it is more likely the opposite. With baptism we know that God's Spirit will continue to move us and shape us and blow us into unexpected places, with challenges beyond our dreams as we strive to be faithful to the God who calls us by name.

But the Spirit will blow along other people, other supporters and fellow travelers. From different places and speaking different languages, the church will continue to support and nurture us even as the winds blow.

On this day we take some of those primordial elements – bread and juice, food and drink, body and blood, we take spirit, breath, and words and languages, and we take the water of baptism – and the spirit blows them together, creating and confirming our identity as we begin to better hear and understand who we are together and who God is calling us to be.

On Pentecost, we were gathered in a room, and suddenly from heaven came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house. Take heart, for when the spirit blows, big things are about to happen. When the Spirit blows, mighty deeds can be done. When the Spirit blows, we can find better and more complete understanding. May it be so. May it be so here, with us, among us, through us as we receive again, the power of God's spirit to make us into the church God needs. May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> A retelling of Acts 2:1-6, with a change to the first person plural pronouns.