

The Mighty Wind of Pentecost

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New Song Church

My older sister Julie has both the best, and the worst, birthday in the world. That's because she was born on Christmas Eve. It's great in that no one ever forgets her birthday. But it's also the worst because who can compete with Jesus at Christmas? Especially when we were growing up, the excitement of the holiday always overshadowed her birthday.

I also share a birthday with an important church holiday, but in my case I lucked out. That's because I was born on Pentecost, the birthday of the Church. I didn't realize this until I was an adult, because my parents weren't very churchy and never mentioned it. But one day as I was filling out an online form where you enter your birthday on a calendar, I realized that I was born on a Sunday. I looked it up and lo and behold, I was born on Pentecost, which happened to fall on May 21st the year I was born.

I've been happy about this ever since, because it's totally cool to share a birthday with the church. It's a day when we wear red clothes, and the church is decorated, and the music is lively, and it's all a bit chaotic and over the top and energetic. Sort of like my life, actually.

All of this hoopla is because this is the day when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit, which had been promised by Jesus before his ascension. And that first Pentecost was quite a celebration. There was the rush of a mighty wind, and tongues of flame, and the miracle of everyone being able to understand many different languages. One of my favorite parts is when Peter says these words, echoing those of the prophet Joel:

I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.

Talk about thrilling! This is the event that marked the beginning of the Church's mission to the larger world. It's the day when the Holy Spirit arrived with a bang, a whoosh, and a holler, so to speak.

Pentecost is clearly meant in part to be a contrast to the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis, in which the Babylonians wanted to make a name for themselves by building a mighty city and a tower with its top in the heavens. God was displeased, and disrupted the work by confusing the language of the workers so that they could no longer understand each another. In Pentecost, that story is reversed. This time, the babel of languages ends in unity, not division.

That said, there's something a bit chaotic about what happened in the Upper Room that day---just as there's something chaotic about the Holy Spirit. Pentecost gives us the template for how the Holy Spirit behaves in the world. The story shows how the spirit flows into new channels, breaks

up obstacles and sweeps away what is no longer needed. That's not always easy, nor does it always feel safe, but it's certainly thrilling.

So today I invite you to think of times in your life during which the spirit overflowed and overwhelmed you. Maybe it was at a joyful wedding or during a reconciliation with someone you thought was lost to you forever. Maybe it was at a musical performance, or on a trip when something stopped you in your tracks, so that you could only stand there, gob smacked. I remember I felt that way as I stood on the rim of the Grand Canyon and when I saw the Northern Lights in Alaska.

We live in an age, alas, that does its best to insulate us from such experiences. It's hard to feel the mighty rush of the spirit, after all, when we're staring at a computer screen or scrolling on our phones. Much of modern life cocoons us in layers of cynicism, anxiety and fear.

Given that, thank goodness the spirit is inventive! She's endlessly creative—and I say “she” because there's a long tradition in the church of referring to the Holy Spirit in feminine terms. She knows how to pick locks and break open doors. She's persistent, like a teenager who wants the keys to the car. Give her an inch and she'll take a mile---always for good, of course, though you might wonder at the time whether you really want her around.

I think we need Pentecost in part because much of the church year, frankly, can be pretty somber. But on Pentecost, we are called to be wildly optimistic and insanely hopeful, despite all evidence to the contrary.

To do so, I think perhaps the most important thing we can do is pay attention. I'm reminded of the dazzling photos being taken by the new James Webb telescope. You've probably seen some of these images too. They are over-the-top stunning, with galaxies and nebulae radiating color and pulsing with energy.

Now if you look up into the sky on an ordinary night, especially if you're in a city, you don't see anything like this. You probably won't see more than a sprinkling of stars, and if someone told you what was really overhead you might say, “yeah, right.” It takes the power of that telescope to bring the splendor into focus. It takes the power of attention to make things visible.

So maybe what we need to do, on Pentecost especially, is cultivate our inner telescope. We need to keep searching the heavens and the earth, alert for wonders, attuned to the sound of the wind stirring in the distance.

On a personal note, this is what I've tried to do in my new book, which will be published in September. In it I explore sacred sites and experiences in the United States. They're not ones that you might think of as sacred, at least at first glance. Instead of churches, in the book I describe visiting prehistoric sites, Native American holy places, and natural wonders. Each chapter is tied to a different theme or element—sacred water, sacred fire, sacred lights, sacred wood, and so on. For the chapter on sacred air, for example, I saw the Sandhill Crane Migration in Nebraska, and for the one on stone I visited Pipestone National Monument in Minnesota, which has a vein of sacred red rock that's been used to make ceremonial pipes for millennia. I hiked beneath the

redwoods of California, toured Dunbar Cave in Tennessee to see mysterious prehistoric art, and marveled at the Serpent Mound, a massive earthen snake that winds its way down a hill in Ohio.

What I learned along the way reinforces the message of Pentecost: the Holy Spirit is everywhere, once you open your heart and your eyes. And while we live in an age of tremendous uncertainty and turmoil and change, we need to remember that these are the times when the Spirit does her most creative work.

Let me end by telling you one of my favorite stories from my book, which I include in the chapter on sacred fire. It comes from the Desert Fathers and Mothers of Egypt, who during the third-century fled to the desert to escape the temptations of the world and devote themselves to God. There's a story from that time about an enthusiastic young monk who one day came to an older monk for advice, a man who was renowned for his wisdom. The younger monk said to the older one, "Father, I follow all the rules. I fast, pray, and meditate. I do my best to purify my thoughts. Now what more should I do?"

In reply the old man stood up and stretched out his hands to heaven, like this, and as he did so his fingers became ten lamps of fire. And he asked the young monk: "Why not become fire?"

I don't know what that means, but I just love that story. It's so deeply, deeply weird in all the right ways. Did his hands really burst into flames? What did he mean by "becoming fire"? Who knows? All I can say is that I love the contrast between the earnest, good-boy approach of the supplicant and the over-the-top response of the older man. Quit trying to follow all the rules, he said. Try bursting into flames instead.

So let me ask you: what's waiting to burst into flames inside of you? What visions and what dreams are percolating? This is the time to have them catch fire. Because if you give the Holy Spirit even a tiny opening, she will rush in with a mighty wind.