

WHEN GOD'S SPIRIT BLOWS

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

John 3:1-8
Acts 2:1-4, 12-17

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The wind! We know it when we feel it; we recognize it when we see its affects, but how do we describe it. Jesus once said, *"The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."* (John 3:8).

For thousands of years, no one really thought about measuring the wind or how that might even be done. But then, in the late 1700s, a cabin boy in the British Navy began to keep a meteorological journal so that he could better understand and be prepared for weather conditions. His name was Francis Beaufort, and he grew up to become a Rear Admiral, serving in the Royal Navy for 68 years. Over the course of his long career, he developed a method for describing the wind that became known as "The Beaufort Scale."

As a sailor, Beaufort categorized the wind according to the effect wind has on such things as water, sails, and rising smoke. The levels will likely sound familiar, because we continue to hear them on weather forecasts today. First there is "calm." That's when the sea is like a mirror. Then comes a "light breeze," "moderate breeze," and "strong breeze." When a "gale" wind begins to blow, the waves produce crests that break into sea spray. When the wind is categorized as a "storm", the waves are high with long, overhanging crests that make the water look white. At the top of the wind scale is the "hurricane." According to the Beaufort scale, there are a total of 17 measurable levels of wind. You only see 13 levels on this chart, but the remaining 4 levels are additional hurricane levels. And you can also see that descriptions have been added for the impact of each level on land.

Similarly, in the Bible we discover not only the presence of wind, but that this wind has different levels and noticeable effects. Scripturally, the word "wind" is often used to describe the presence of God, and particularly the movement of God's Spirit. From the first chapter of Genesis when *"a wind from God swept over the face of the waters"* (Genesis 1:2) and the world was created through the birth of the church in the New Testament when *"Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house..."* (Acts 2:2) the Spirit of God is likened to the wind. And like there are multiple types of winds as described by the Beaufort scale there are multiple types of winds when it comes to the blowing of God's Spirit.

Many of us know the calming presence and gentleness of the Holy Spirit when it blows through our lives. When Jesus first appeared to his disciples following his resurrection, he said, *"Peace be with you."* And then he breathed on them and said, *"Receive the Holy Spirit"* (Jn. 20:21-23). Sometimes the Spirit comes to us in this gentle, reassuring way, and when it does, we know without a doubt that God is with us. God is our help and our strength, a calming, sustaining presence amidst the turmoil of life. When we experience this

reassuring breeze of the Spirit we are often left with a deep sense of peace. Many of us might prefer that our Holy Spirit experiences be limited to this gentle, calm and peaceful level, but that's not the only way in which God's Spirit blows.

Scripture reveals other times when the Spirit comes as a steading breeze. It is a breeze that has a life creating and enduring quality to it. In the Bible, this is the "*wind from God*" that swept over the face of the waters during creation, and brought order out of chaos (Gen. 1:2). Then there is the stronger breeze that blows when God's Spirit comes upon individuals who are called and anointed for God's purposes. This is "*the Spirit of the Lord*" that came upon Old Testament individuals like Gideon (Judges 6:34) and Samson (Judges 13:25) and David (1 Samuel 16:13) and empowered them for specific missions. Their missions meant facing difficult situations and even hostile opposition, but doing so resulted in the unfolding of God's plan. When God calls us to face a difficult situation that needs changed so that new, faithful opportunities can unfold that is when we need the Holy Spirit to come to us as a stronger breeze, a breeze that steadily empowers us according to the will of God.

A bit higher up the scale is the Spirit that comes as a "gale" wind, a force that breaks unhealthy patterns and shakes up the status quo. In a world that so often fights fire with fire and responds to violence with even more violence, this is the power to be different and to go in a different direction. As Christians, we know the only response to evil that produces lasting, eternal change is Jesus' response of sacrificial love. When hearts and hands are busy and dirty from loving and caring for others, what we see is the Holy Spirit at work, changing the status quo. This gale type force is a strong, steady wind that knocks us a bit off balance as it pushes us out of our comfort zones.

And then at the top of our wind chart today is the Spirit as storm. Some might even equate this experience with a "hurricane" type force. This is what happened when the Spirit blew into Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, just ten days after Jesus ascended to heaven. It's true Jesus disciples were anticipating the Spirit's arrival because Jesus had told them it was coming. But they had no idea how much their lives would be turned upside down by it.

When the day arrived, the apostles and other followers of Jesus were gathered in prayer, waiting for the power that Jesus had promised. Suddenly, things became very stormy. We are told that "*there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability*" (Acts 2:3-4). Lives that had been oriented inward were suddenly able to see a desperate world in need of a gospel message of salvation – salvation through Christ, through God's abounding grace and sacrificial love. In those moments, fearful disciples were transformed into fearless evangelists.

But that Spirit power did not end with them; it spread to others. Peter, who had behaved like a Christ-denying coward a few weeks earlier, was inspired to speak boldly. He stood up in front of a mob of mockers – people who were dishing out insults and freely laughing at the followers of Jesus and accusing

them of being drunk at 9 o'clock in the morning. Peter shouted above them. He declared that what was happening before their eyes was predicted by the prophet Joel years earlier, and then he boldly proclaimed that "*everyone*" not just some but "*everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved*" (Acts 2:21). The combination of the Holy Spirit's arrival and Peter's bold preaching resulted in three thousand people being added to the church that day. It was a mighty, transformational wind that whipped through Jerusalem. Even today, it can still be described as the storm of a century – perhaps millennium is an even more accurate description. The wind of that storm blew away old ways of thinking and living and what was left was unexpected and new. In those moments the Church of Jesus Christ was born.

On this day of Pentecost, we remember what happened two thousand years ago, while also anticipating and preparing ourselves for that same powerful Holy Spirit presence to blow through this place and into each one of us today. When God's Spirit blew into Jerusalem lives were changed, challenges were accepted, and new members were added. I think it says something about the Spirit's blowing presence in this place that four young people were added to the church's membership today. Clearly, God's Spirit is still blowing and shaking things up, and this is exactly what is needed for the church to continue to be the church of Jesus Christ in the world.

As we have at various times witnessed the exploding power of nature at work during a real-life hurricane, let us, as the gathered faithful, not just remember but also bear witness to the explosive power of Almighty God. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, language, cultural and racial barriers are broken down, which is something we humans seem incapable of doing on our own. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, those who are frightened and hesitant to step outside comfort zones find the courage to share and to be the presence of Jesus Christ in a self-centered, hostile world. Through the power of the Holy Spirit the lost are found, the hopeless discover hope, and those without joy are suddenly overflowing with joy. There are many who might prefer to avoid, even run away from such power, but those who experience it are amazingly changed and blessed, and they then become a blessing to others.

God's Spirit blows in and through the landscape of our lives, and we are changed. Sometimes we are calmed and comforted – sometimes we are strengthened and challenged. And sometimes God's Spirit blows and we are profoundly shaken up because that is exactly what's needed. Much of the time, we may find ourselves hoping and praying for the blowing God's gentle and enduring Spirit but today is not that day. And it's a good thing because we who are weak, fearful, and easily distracted, we need a powerful force blowing through our lives if we are to be the strong, transformational and enduring Church of Jesus Christ in the world. We need a wind force that is the Holy Spirit of Pentecost. May it be so! Amen.

