

BACK TO THE BEGINNING

--Today is Pentecost Sunday.

That probably doesn't exactly send a chill down your spine or get your pulse racing, but that's only because generally we haven't done a very good job over the years impressing upon people how important the occasion is.

And yet, as far as the Church is concerned, it is an observance of the first magnitude. Looking through the lens of the evangelist Luke--who is credited with also authoring the Book of Acts, from which our reading is derived for the morning--if there is no Pentecost, there is no history whatever leading eventually to the founding of a St. John's United Church of Christ.

You see, Pentecost, which always falls some fifty days after Easter, represents a sort of birthday for the Christian Church. At Pentecost, the uncertainty, the confusion, and the disorientation of those first days following the crucifixion and the resurrection give way to something else.

Pentecost is that decisive moment when these earliest followers begin to see with clarity what the way ahead looks like. They still do. As is so dramatically portrayed by Luke, with the coming of the Holy Spirit upon those who are gathered together on that day, there is a distinctive sense as to what now lies before them. There still is. Oh, to be sure, the specifics of that will require continuous redefining and reshaping as they go, but the basic direction they must travel becomes fundamentally apparent. It still does.

"All of them," reads the account, "were filled with the Holy Spirit"--which is to say the Spirit of God--"and [they] began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability" (2.4). That's not about "speaking in tongues," as some so-called Pentecostals would have us understand it, but about bold outreach and extravagant hospitality. The Good News of what God intends, you see, is not only for us, is not simply for people who are already part of our group, is not merely for people who are just like us. As is suggested by the sheer number of fiery "tongues" said to mark the experience, what Jesus has begun must now be carried into and articulated in every corner of the known world.

In short, the coming in of the Holy Spirit is followed immediately by the going out of the people of Jesus.

--When we're dealing with Pentecost, we're dealing with beginnings.

Frankly, beginnings are messy. There's always more than a little of the unknown to the situation. We can't really predict in advance what fully to expect. So, beginnings are always a bit chaotic--feeling and confusing, typically discomfiting and demanding something of us that we are reluctant to give--like having to tolerate and live with, at least over the short term, the stress of both ambiguity and uncertainty. In time, of course, the unnerving beginning gives way to a new settled state, but there are some understandable quaking and shaking that first have to be endured.

Don't those disciples gathered in that room have experience of just that? Given where we find ourselves these days, don't we?

Not surprisingly, then, as Luke presents it, the beginning-point of that first Pentecost is characterized by just such messiness--of the suddenness, from heaven, of "the rush of a mighty wind" (2.2a). We may be so preoccupied with the reported "tongues as of fire" that we overlook that ever-so-important wind, representative

of the Spirit, which, as Jesus testifies elsewhere, “blows where it chooses” (John 3.8). The Greek adjective [“*biai’as*”], rendered here as “mighty,” can also be accurately translated as wind that is “forceful,” even “violent.” “And,” we are told, “it filled the entire house” (2.2b).

If we are to join God in this great endeavor to which, as the Church, we are being blown, there’s no easing into it, no cautious taking of our good old time, no dipping of only the tips of our toes in the water to test it thoroughly before we jump in. This is not a “let’s open the windows a crack and feel how pleasant the breeze is” sort of thing. On the contrary, it is a house-shaking experience. It rattles the windows, makes the floor boards creak, presses against the walls so hard that one would swear one could see them buckle a bit.

If God is the source behind that mighty, forceful, violent-seeming wind, it may be because the house, perhaps too settled for too long, requires a good shaking. Further, it may be because that house needs to be reminded, too, that it can now adequately handle a good shaking.

--Pentecost is the birth of something. It is that decisive moment when we understand with greater clarity what the way ahead looks like. Oh, to be sure, the specifics of that will require continuous redefining and reshaping as we go, but the basic direction that we must travel is fundamentally clear. Going back to the messy beginning of Pentecost and remembering our gusty, blustery roots in the Holy Spirit, we are reminded that our proper place is not huddling happily inside the house but reaching out with purpose.

That said, I think that it is fabulous timing for us at St. John’s to follow the likes of Pentecost this year with an occasion where the recommended candidate for the next Settled Pastor of this congregation is presented and voted upon. Surely, that’s a very post-Pentecost, Spirit-imbued thing to be undertaking, bringing us back to the messy beginning where we are compelled to remember who we are and Whose we are.

--Whoa, whoa, did you feel that?

I’m sure that I distinctly felt a breeze--a wee bit of wind that is stirring in this place.

Taking our cue from our Pentecost witness, if we will allow for it, it, too, will fill “the entire house.”

What could that mean?

What would that mean?