
Pentecost
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
June 5, 2022
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Genesis 11:1-9 and John 14:8-17, 25-27

Welcome to pentecost! I hope that the hymns and prayers have been reminder enough that today is pentecost, because this year I selected less traditional pentecost biblical readings. But trust me - the readings were definitely about pentecost.

In our reading from John it is only the last paragraph that gives a nod to pentecost. Jesus said, “I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

John’s Jesus describes his coming departure, and his later sending of the advocate, the holy spirit to the people. If you think that pentecost is about wind and fire, then you are thinking of the version of the story in the book of Acts. But the gospel of John was written decades after the book of Acts. By the time that the gospel of John was written, the wind did not matter so much. It was the spirit that mattered. And it is the spirit that still matters.

In the Bible the presence of God is often depicted as wind or as fire. In both biblical Hebrew and biblical Greek the word that means “wind” also means “spirit”.

[image: pneuma]

The word in biblical greek is “pneuma”. From which we get the word pneumatic. That is why it is a good spiritual practice to know how to fix a flat bicycle tire. And if you don’t know how, bring your bicycle on Tues @ 9 am for some completely amateurish and unprofessional help with your bicycle. May the pneuma be with you. Or at the least, may the pneuma be with your tires.

[image: fixing bicycle]

So what really happened at pentecost? What happened was something that was

hard to put into words. And so, the biblical authors used the word “pneuma” to describe something that they could sense. Something that that they could feel. Something that they could not see. According to theologian Marcus Borg, we need to understand pentecost in relation to the story of the tower of Babel. Which is why we had the reading from Genesis this morning.

[image: speaking christian]

In his book, “Speaking Christian”, Borg says, “The echoing of Babel in [the] story of Pentecost has a powerful metaphorical meaning. Pentecost is the reversal of Babel. What happened at Babel confused the world by dividing it into separate languages and countries. This resulted in misunderstandings, rivalries, and conflict. Pentecost is the beginning of the reunification of humanity.”

Of course it depends a bit on how we hear the story of the tower of Babel. To me it always reads like a reverse wedding. At a wedding the minister says, “what God has joined together let no-one rent asunder”. But with the tower of Babel story it is more like “what people have joined together, let God rent asunder.” It’s the opposite of a wedding. Borg’s idea is that pentecost is a bringing together of the people that God “rent asunder” earlier. It’s a shotgun divorce that eventually leads to a marriage.

Borg’s idea is not embraced by all theologians, but it is an interesting idea. The idea that pentecost was about restoring a balance from a previous time in history. Accomplished by the spirit engaging with all of humanity. If anyone has a more gracious way to understand Borg’s theory, let’s discuss it over coffee, today or any day.

[image: wind]

In spirit of all that, wind is a popular image for pentecost. For one thing, we all know what wind is. We all know the power of wind. Think about a cyclone. Think about all of that transformative power focused in one spot. Does that remind you of anything? No, I am not still thinking about pentecost. I am thinking of the movie, “The Wizard of Oz.”.

[image: dorothy in bw]

When that story begins, life for Dorothy was “normal”, and not particularly happy. Life was I suppose adequate for a young girl, but she was bored with her life. You could say that her life lacked colour. But then the wind came. The wind picked up Dorothy, her dog

Toto, her house, her cranky neighbour and others and took them all to a place where everything was different. Where nothing was normal.

[image: dorothy with the munchkins]

At least not unless your “normal” includes little people who spend their time dancing and singing, and monkeys fly. Dorothy went to a place with unexpected dangers. But Dorothy also found new friends. Friends with unexplainable gifts. The gifts of courage, compassion, and wisdom. After continuing on her journey, Dorothy and her friends discover a magical place. Emerald City - full of beauty and full of promise and opportunity.

[image: dorothy home]

And when Dorothy and Toto returned home to Kansas - what was different? Was anything different? In the movie, it all looked the same as earlier. The film even went back to black and white - or sepia. And yet, something HAD changed. Dorothy’s home had become a loved and special place. What had actually changed? Glinda the good told Dorothy that love was always and already inside Dorothy. Nothing external changed. Only Dorothy’s attitude had changed. Her soul had been made light by the wind of the cyclone.

The wind changed nothing. And yet the wind allowed everything to change. That sounds like the spirit to me! That spirit that comes out of nowhere, take us to places unknown, and then returns us to see our own world with new eyes and new hearts. The spirit that helps us to change our attitudes. Our physical reality may or may not change, but our attitudes can always change. That’s what pentecost is all about. Pentecost has never been about the wind and the fire. It has always been about the spirit. The spirit that allows us to open ourselves to change and new life. Dorothy’s story in the Wizard of Oz is a real pentecost story. I wonder how open we are to that sort of transformation? Are we actually open to transformation ourselves? Do not make me get my flying monkeys!

[image: chocolat]

I realize that we are all sick of hearing about Johnny Depp, but I’m also reminded of the movie, “chocolat”. That film from the year 2000 is about a chocolate-maker and her young daughter. They move to a small french village in 1959 and set up a chocolate

shop. The town is small enough that it takes awhile for strangers to be accepted. But through patience and perseverance, Vianne and her daughter Anouk do make friends with the people of the village. This transformation happens mainly because Vianne is so friendly herself, and because she has such a hopeful nature. The fact that Vianne gives the villagers chocolate does not hurt either.

[image: vianne listening]

But the main reason the villagers accept Vianne is that Vianne actually listens to the villagers. She does not judge them, she simply gets to know them. And she supports them in their day-to-day struggles. And as Vianne listens to the villagers, as they tell her their own life stories - they are changed. For example, one very disturbed woman who was the victim of frequent beatings from her alcoholic husband moves in with Vianne and learns about the chocolaterie. And as she learns, she gains new self-awareness and new self-confidence. What she actually gains is nothing less than new life. And by the end of the movie, many people in the village has at least some experience of “new life”, thanks to the presence of Vianne. Pentecost comes with wind. But it can also come with chocolate. Who knew?

[image: chocolat mayor negative]

It sounds very simple if I tell the story that way. But there are a few complications. The village is a place where tradition reigns above everything else. Where people do what they have always done. Where people do what their parents did. Where people do what their grand-parents did. It is therefore a village of order, of calm, of known expectations. It is a place where people enjoy tranquility more than change and drama. It is a place where everyone even goes to the same church - and they go every week. It is a place where knowing your place in society is more important than ... well ... more important than anything else.

[image: chocolat chocolaterie]

So in fact, Vianne and Anouk have problems integrating with the community because they are not interested in tradition. Vianne opens her chocolate shop during Lent - at a time when the villagers were expected to avoid all pleasures. Moreover, Vianne, who wears somewhat provocative clothing, who does not go to church, who has a child

that is labelled “illegitimate”, does not naturally fit into the town that observes and honours traditional values and ways. Consequently, the mayor - who is a controlling person - starts a crusade against Vianne and her delicious chocolates. And initially, most of the town’s people follow the mayor.

In other words, when Vianne and Anouk arrive, they are clearly not welcome. They upset people. Not so much because of their actions, but because of their presence. Because of what people think they represent.

[image: chocolate mayor indulging]

And Vianne decides to move on to another village - as she has done many times during her life. But the villagers rally behind her and help her create a chocolate festival for Easter Sunday. The mayor - who is still against Vianne - breaks into the chocolate shop and destroys the display. And in the process a small piece of chocolate lands on his lip - and he unwittingly tastes it. And he finally breaks down and sees the great gift of Vianne and her chocolate. Then he sort of eats the entire chocolate display.

[image: wind]

The movie invites us to consider the question - is Vianne a much needed breath of fresh air, or is she a threat to everything that the village holds dear? Or perhaps, she is both. Vianne is certainly a “breath”, a pneuma, of some sort. Or perhaps a wind. Or perhaps even a cyclone. In the earliest scene in the movie where we meet Vianne and Anouk, we see them being literally blown into town by a strong wind. It is almost as if they are being forced into the village against their wishes. And at the exact same time, the church doors blow open during a worship service. And the mayor himself gets up to bolt the doors shut - to shut out the wind that is bringing Vianne and new life into the village. The church doors are closed to keep the winds of pentecost out. But pentecost came to the village in spite of the doors being locked.

[image: pentecost]

And so on Pentecost - we each face the same question. Is the spirit that we feel like a breath of fresh air? Or is the spirit that we feel more like a threat to our traditions? Or is it both. Is the spirit both comforting and challenging? Is it upholding and threatening to our

way of life. If it feels like both, then it probably is the spirit! And just as for Dorothy, and for the villagers that Vianne helps, we too are invited to embrace the spirit of pentecost and to open ourselves to new possibilities. What might that look like? I know that somewhere buried in our past we once had a slogan that said “embracing change”. How has that been going? Have we welcomed and embraced change or have we responded with a little bit of denial and fear. Have we - like the mayor - shut the church doors to keep the winds of pentecost out? I’ll tell you a secret. The winds are here anyway. The spirit of change is here.

Church doors cannot control the spirit. That spirit that comes out of nowhere, take us to places unknown, and then returns us to see our own world with new eyes and new hearts. The spirit that helps us to change our attitudes. Our physical reality may or may not change, but our attitudes can always change. That’s what pentecost is all about. Pentecost has never been about the wind and the fire. It has always been about the spirit.

Do you recall a time recently when we were all “taken to places unknown and then returned to see our own world with new eyes and new hearts?” For me, that’s a pretty good description of the pandemic. In the spring of 2020 our church - well, our whole society - stopped meeting in our traditional ways. But now, things are continuing to ease and we are all invited back. And when we return, are we able to see our own world with new eyes and new hearts? I certainly hope so. We have to get something positive out of the past 2 years of trauma and drama. And I would love to know what each of us have learned to appreciate.

Many people have told me that the pandemic has given them a much more focused appreciation of the value of simply getting together with friends and family. Even in the church. Some people who came to the Royal Tea we had had not been physically coming on Sunday mornings. And I want to be clear. I am not critical of anyone and their decisions around how to stay safe with the pandemic. But it was like pentecost to me on Thursday when the fellowship room was filled with laughter, joy, smiles, food, and the

ability to simply gather together. The men's breakfast has been meeting again. We have a group that knits together. It must be the only church knitting group that I know that does not feel the need to call themselves the "knit-wits". Thanks be to God. We are gathering in various ways. And you are all invited to come back as you feel comfortable.

We, like Dorothy have been invited to a strange land. Our land was called isolation. The spirit called us to spend time there. And we are now invited back to "normal". Will we return as if our pandemic journey changed nothing? Or will we return full of a new spirit of deep appreciation of the fact that we can simply gather again. Have we let ourselves be transformed by the journey? I hope so. Because we are called - not back to our past - for forwards into our future.

The spirit moves in mysterious ways. How do we want to BE in our own community?
The spirit invites us to grow out of the pandemic, and back into each other's arms.

Welcome to pentecost!

Amen.