

Today is Pentecost, a day we set aside to remember the birthday of the church. That's the whole Christian church, not just the Presbyterian church or Community of Faith church. Really what we're saying is that we're celebrating the birth of Christianity. That may seem funny, because I think most of us think of Christianity beginning when Jesus was born. But even though he had a band of followers, it wasn't what we think of as "church" until after Jesus died, rose and ascended into heaven. In fact, people didn't really begin to call followers of Jesus "Christians" until sometime late in the first century. Even then, the term wasn't complementary. The religion that these early Christians followed was considered weird by most people of the day, and it wasn't until the third century that Christianity became accepted in society.

But what we're celebrating today is more than a birthday. What we celebrate today is the fulfillment of the promise that Jesus made to his disciples, both during his ministry on earth and between the time he rose from death and was taken into heaven to be with the Father. The promise of a helper, an advocate to be with his followers, taking his place as guide and helper for his followers in ministry. With a big rush of wind and tongues of fire, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of the Living God came upon the followers of Jesus Christ—and so the Christian church was born. The Spirit brought the rag-tag bunch of apostles and disciples and students together and created something new—a group with the unity of spirit that we call "being the body of Christ", or more commonly, "being church". In that moment, that we read about in our scripture today, the Christian church was born.

In the passage from Acts we hear about the Spirit of God coming onto the followers of Jesus. Let's hear the beginning of the story now, and as you listen, think about what catches your attention in this story, and make a note of it if you want to.

Acts 2:1-13: When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

This is not long after Jesus has ascended into heaven, and his followers are staying together in a house in Jerusalem. Suddenly a rush of wind blows through the house, and according to the account found in Acts, each person has a tongue of flame sitting on their head. It's not a burning flame, though, it's the flame of the Spirit, it's a sign that the Spirit has indeed come and taken root in each person present. As a further sign each person is able to speak in languages that they don't normally understand—but that onlookers who spoke the different languages could identify. That's what "speaking in tongues" means, that a person begins to speak in a language that they've never been able to speak before. Now some of the onlookers were quite impressed that these "Galileans" were speaking languages they couldn't speak before. But there were others there who dismissed the miracle by saying, "they are filled with new wine". In other words, they weren't touched by the spirit, they were drunk.

What catches your attention here? Anyone want to share?

Some passages of scripture are so familiar to us that sometimes we don't really listen or read it carefully, because we know what happens—or so we think. As I read this very familiar passage this time I was struck by the word used to describe the wind that came: violent. The word in Greek here is *biaias*, which can be translated “forcible” or, again, “violent.” This interested me because I think we don't tend to think of the winds of the spirit as “violent”; in fact, when I was looking at hymns and songs to use this week the language was all about a gentle spirit, a calming spirit, more like a breeze, really, nothing too challenging or difficult. But a violent wind? Perhaps like a tornado or a hurricane-- it makes me think of videos I've seen of weather channel reporters broadcasting from a hurricane location. Palm trees bent over, rain at the horizontal, and the poor reporter barely able stand upright. That's what I'd call a “forceful” or “violent” wind.

The thing is, the Spirit comes to us in different ways. It may be in a still, small voice or a dove coming down gently from the sky. But I kind of like the idea of a forceful wind- you know, something that really gets your attention. And the wind that came on the disciples was that kind of wind, the kind of wind that knocks you off your feet, blows off your hat, messes up your hair. The kind of wind that might make others think you've been drinking. The kind of wind that teaches you new things, new languages, new ways of being in the world.

Have you ever been blown away by the Spirit? By something you are called to do by God, by an encounter that you just knew, that was the Spirit of God? Do you come to church, to worship or study or fellowship or mission activities expecting to be blown away by the Spirit? Do you live your life in the world expecting encounters with the violent wind of the Spirit?

You might be thinking, *We're Presbyterian! We don't get blown away by the Spirit!* We might tend to think of being blown away by the spirit in terms of speaking in tongues, as the disciples did on Pentecost; or by waving our arms in worship or being out of ourselves in some way. But you might be surprised to know that our Book of Church Order makes references to the role of the Spirit in our church life at least 18 times, in such matters as baptism, healing, the Lord's Supper, the mission of the church, worship, and scripture. Two of the undergirding principles of the Presbyterian church is that “Christ is present with the church in both Spirit and Word”; and that in mission, worship and government “matters are to be ordered according to the Word by reason and sound judgment, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.” We are to rely on the leading of the Spirit in everything we do as Presbyterian Christians. We expect and believe that the Spirit of God is among us, especially when we are gathered together doing the work of the church and worshiping together as the body of Christ. I believe that the Spirit is with me as I prepare the worship service each week, and as I write my sermon, and as I lead worship, and I believe that the Spirit is here as we worship each week.

There's nothing in our form of church government that prohibits speaking in tongues or raising our arms or shouting out Amen if we feel so moved. In worship, the Spirit is here and must be allowed to work freely in us. For most of us, it just isn't part of our tradition and experience. But it isn't wrong, and if you feel so moved, do it! The Spirit is always here with us, but we make it hard for the Spirit to work among us when we're paralyzed by fear and hopelessness. In that case the Spirit must work to change our hearts first, and only then are we free to accept the leadership of the Spirit.

And how do we know that the Spirit is with us if we don't speak in tongues or wave our arms about? We read in I Corinthians Paul talking about different manifestations of the Spirit that might be found within any given group of believers. Listen to another familiar passage:

⁴Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in

everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

Paul mentions here 9 different things: healing, speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, prophecy, knowledge, wisdom, working of miracles, faith, and discernment. This isn't intended to be a complete list of all spiritual gifts; I know there are other lists other places in the letters of Paul; but his point here is that all of the gifts come from the same Spirit. So, even if you don't speak in tongues, there are other gifts you will have. In this congregation alone, there are gifts of teaching, of music, of hospitality, of patience, of caring, of knowledge, of encouragement, of enthusiasm, and I'm sure many more I haven't named. These gifts are important because it is through these gifts that we are able to work together as the body of Christ. And this is Paul's point: there are many gifts, but one Spirit who chooses how to distribute the gifts; and each gift is important to the life of the church in the same way that each body part is important to the life of the body. .

Today we celebrate Pentecost—the coming of the Holy Spirit to the followers of Jesus Christ—and the birthday of the Christian church. We celebrate this because without the Spirit there would be no church, because it's the Spirit that gives us the gifts we need to do the work of the church. Here at New Covenant I feel a fresh wind blowing through, a fresh wind of the Spirit, giving us the energy to clear out all the clutter and make a fresh start. Let's celebrate this Pentecost by continuing to be open to wherever the Spirit is leading us--- and asking the Spirit to lead to us those people who need to be a part of our body. Amen.