

“It’s how the spirit works”
Sermon on Pentecost Sunday, June 9, 2019
Based on Acts 2

The Day of Pentecost. Every year it pushes us a little bit. On this day we are getting a concentrated dose of the unruly God spirit, the force from above that can't be contained, Pentecostal wind, which occasionally sweeps away our ideas of religion. And if we pay close attention to this story in Acts 2, it almost feels, may the Lord forgive me, as if we're dealing with a teenager here- one that is full of energy and crazy ideas, who unleashes tongues of fire, dreams of a world in which understanding is possible and defies the limits set by those who have, in their own words, "seen it all." The God of Pentecost is young. He laughs about the conventional image of the old man with the long white beard. This one doesn't even have facial hair. He's still acting out. That's why this Book is called: "The Book of Acts." God is acting out, and we, no matter our age, are asked to allow this youthful energy to give us a little kick, to inspire us, to take us along for the ride.

Speaking of youthful energy... It's graduation time in the United States. In fact, we had our graduation party last night, can you tell? And of course, thousands and thousands of students are finishing their formal school education these days in the Tristate area. Some of them are looking forward to more school in a college; some can't wait to leave the classroom. Most of are not quite sure yet what their future will bring. They are young. Their energy is not yet channeled into a simple narrative of life. Their identity is to be shaped and tested by forces as yet unknown. Soon, the wind will sweep them in all kinds of directions. This God of Pentecost has the spirit of young people: ready to conquer the world and shake things up, but also ready to be shaped by the world. "Go out into all the world," Jesus said at the end of the gospel according to Matthew. "Teach them, make them into disciples, and baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." We have all heard that final crescendo from the gospel of Matthew, and it sounds almost like a one-way street: we are teaching you! We are forming and shaping you! But read the gospels and the Book of Acts and you will see that the disciples and even Jesus were also taught by others: by women, children, Samaritans, outcasts, strangers and so on. The teaching, it was not a one-way street. It worked both ways. That's how the spirit always works. The spirit is not strictly hierarchical. It is, you know, profoundly spiritual.

We are going to Dorado, Puerto Rico, next week. And along we bring our own twelve disciples, twelve people under the age of 18. That's quite a bit of youthful energy, and it frankly has dropped the average age of our group by a significant margin. Can you believe it? We are under 40 now, not counting James, who is always 17. We will have our hands full, channeling all that energy into good mission work, allowing them to be who they are but also to be changed and have their young lives impacted by events and people they don't know yet. It's how the spirit works. Sometimes the only place where you will be changed is a place called - not at home! Sometimes the best place where you get a new whiff of God is - not at home. Home is too familiar and comfortable to change you. In the Book of Acts, the spirit wastes no time to send out Christ's disciples in all directions. We hear about Philip who traveled to Africa, and we know from tradition about Thomas who traveled to India, and of course we are familiar with Paul traveling to Europe. They all worked - far from home. The assumption is that they changed the world and brought Christ to these communities. And that's true. But what is often forgotten is that they were also changed and shaped by the people and places they reached. Cause, that's how the spirit works!

As I contemplated the youthful and chaotic energy that we encounter in Acts 2, I kept thinking that we have a paradox on our hands. On the one hand, we still follow a youth ideal in our culture. People always want to look younger, seem younger and act younger than they are. Billions of dollars are spent every year to make people look a little bit younger. I am not going to ask how many of you use products that make you look younger. Let's just say, it's probably most of us. So, we like to be younger. But at the same time people also like to fret and complain about younger people, especially when their inexperience shows. They drive funny. They make outrageous mistakes. They are loud. They leave a mess. And we tend to forget that we made a dumb mistake just yesterday. Appreciating youth means to help them become who they are, tolerating at least some erratic behavior, letting them know that mistakes are not the end of the world, except when you make one on a roof in Puerto Rico. That is not to be tolerated. Mr. Hoagey will yell at you all the way from Lansdale... In essence, the paradox goes like this: we love young people... as long as they are also incredibly mature, right? And some of our young people actually are pretty mature. But, as you all know, that's not always the case and we need to give them space and opportunity to make mistakes and to learn from them, and that is true even for adults. Guess what? It's how the spirit works!

So, the Spirit of God swept through this group of pilgrims on the Day of Pentecost and put in charge of the church young men and women who had yet a lot to learn, who were green in many ways. The bearded people - Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, people with degrees, people with standing on the community, they didn't always appreciate those newcomers. They had lots of things to complain about. We could say, and I say this with some hesitation and with respect for the different stages of life and for older people in general, because they deserve our respect: their bearded God was unable to change, was set in his ways. But Pentecost, this Feast of Pentecost is about the god-force that shakes things up, that is able to change and be changed. And don't we sometimes need that in church and also in society? And by the way, I know some people above the seventy range in our congregation who are incredibly nimble and flexible in their thinking, who are in many ways both mature and young, wise and hilarious, old and young at the same time, and they are a wonderful blessing to us! Learn from them, young people!

In closing, I would like to draw your attention to the irony that we were brought into contact with our friends in Dorado by what insurances call an "Act of God." It was Hurricane Maria with it's devastating winds and storm surges that toppled trees and brought down homes in 2017. How ironic that wind, unpredictable wind, "ruach" in Hebrew, is also a symbol for the spirit of God. And that true acts of God – acts of love and kindness, acts of compassion and justice, acts of faith and community building, acts of unselfish service, are inspired by the same spirit of God who swept through the community on the Day of Pentecost, shaking things up. We are ready for more acts of God and we ask for your prayers when we leave next Sunday so that we may be able to bless and to be blessed, to bring change and to be changed, to give and to receive. It's how the spirit works.

Amen.