

“The Sailboat Church”

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

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Acts 2: 1-10

Today we celebrate Pentecost – the word actually means “50 days”. Originally Pentecost was a Jewish harvest festival which occurred 50 days after the Jewish Passover celebration. The Jewish festival of Pentecost commemorates God’s self-revelation on Mt. Sinai; the occasion when God gave the Law – the 10 Commandments - to Moses. You remember that story: the people of Israel have fled Egypt and their slavery to Pharaoh. They fled right into a wilderness where they often lost their sense of direction, grumbled when they didn’t have water or food, tried to hoard food when it was available because they did not trust God to continue to provide, and often questioned the authority of Moses’ leadership. When they finally made it to the foot of Mt. Sinai – and it must have been an awesome sight – a mountain rising out of the desert – a place believed to house the presence of God – they decided to pitch camp and stay awhile. One day, with the clouds gathering across the peak of the mountain and the wind howling, the people become afraid. So, they say to Moses “We can’t stand it! You go up there and find out what God wants and then come back and tell us.” So Moses climbs the mountain on behalf of his people. There he encounters a violent wind and scorching fire. From Exodus we read:

“On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to

meet God. Now Mt. Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord has descended upon it in fire and the whole mountain shook violently.”

That was how the Jews remembered the self revelation of God at Mt. Sinai and each year, on the Day of Pentecost, they would retell the story – how God took a wandering group of grumblers and whiners and gave them the 10 commandments, creating a community of people who were to worship God and live as God’s people in the world.

Now fast forward about 2000 years. The writer of Acts is about to describe a similar experience in this 2nd chapter of Acts.

Prayer for Understanding:

Read Acts 2: 1-11

Barbara Brown Taylor, preacher, author, professor of religion at Piedmont University in North Georgia, sets the stage for us in her sermon on this passage. She says, “on Pentecost, Jews from all over the civilized world journey to be in Jerusalem, attending worship at the Temple. Pentecost is one of three obligatory feast days and so they go: Medes and Elamites from the east; Romans from the west; Libyans from the south; and Cappadocians from the north – all of them streaming into the city and setting up their own camps, so that walking through the crowded city is like taking a trip around the world, with Arabic singing over here, and Libyan laughter over there, and wafting over it all, the smell of Egyptian food cooking over an open fire.

“There’s only one group missing,” says Taylor, “a small band of orphaned disciples who are not walking the streets at all but huddled together behind locked doors

for fear of their enemies. It must have felt like they had been led out into their own wilderness; loss of a sense of direction, afraid, grumbling, complaining because life had not unfolded like they expected. For all practical purposes, they and their movement are dead – leaderless, powerless, visionless – the sole survivors of a catastrophe that has robbed them of their future. (My words: Survivors of a catastrophe/pandemic that has seemingly robbed them of their future; certainly, robbed them of the world as they have known it.) The world has now become a frightening place for them and they have barricaded themselves against it, believing that their own safety lay in sticking together, locking their doors, and keeping everyone else out.”

I have been thinking about those 50 days between Passover and Pentecost; or Easter and Pentecost for us as Christians. A lot happened to those first disciples of Jesus from the morning when they discovered the empty tomb and then encountered the risen Jesus. And it has been 10 days since the resurrected Jesus ascended into heaven, leaving them finally and completely on their own. A lot can happen in 50 days - nearly 2 months. Think about what has happened in your life in the past two months. The storm clouds gather and the wind howls and a lot can happen in 50 days. We become the survivors of scorching catastrophe, and we are convinced we have been robbed of our futures. So, are we really all that surprised that the 11 followers of Jesus are holed up in a tiny room while the rest of the world celebrates?

And then it happens. It is a miserable scenario, radiating hopelessness and fear and finality of Jesus’ death, when a tsunami of sound, the Holy Spirit, descends on the dispirited band and torches each head with flickering fire and they start speaking strange words, words of power, words of hope, words such as they have never spoken before. So

quickly do the words tumble from their mouths that they do not know what they are saying. But the people around them, people from every nation, those people understand. Once adrift and rudderless, the disciples suddenly find themselves in the midst of a howling wind and lightning. And Peter, the disciple who lost his voice and denied knowing Jesus (not just once, not just twice, but three times), now becomes the courageous leader and opens the locked door; he stands before the multitudes, like Moses, and re-discovers his voice. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit stirring in him, Peter spoke up with bold vision, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection. And that first sermon Peter preaches is some sermon – thousands come to believe in Jesus as their Christ, the Messiah, Son of God.

I think the Holy Spirit has so much to teach us. Whenever I read this story of the first Christian Pentecost, I am reminded of the many parallels to the sailing lessons – lessons about how to navigate with the wind/spirit - which my father taught me as a child sailing on Lake Lanier. Those sailing lessons have helped me navigate life. The early followers of Jesus Christ used the symbol of a sailboat for the church. A sailboat relies on the wind for forward movement. In contrast, a rowboat is dependent on the strength and endurance of the people inside the rowboat to move the boat forward over the water. Inevitably, oarsmen will grow tired and lack vision. Is the church today a sailboat church, relying on God's Spirit to direct our mission and ministry or are we a rowboat church relying on our own efforts to achieve our goals? If we intend to be a sailboat church, relying on God's Spirit to direct us, here are a few sailing lessons:

Sailing Lesson #1: a sailboat depends on the wind to fill the sails and keep the boat moving forward into the future. On occasion, however, the wind will utterly and

suddenly cease. Sailors call this being “in irons”. It is no use jiggling the tiller; a boat without wind in its sails is a boat that bobs along directionless, subject only to the occasional snippet of breeze. There is absolutely nothing you can do when you are “in irons” but wait for the wind to return. Seems to me that this is as good a time as any to pray instead of engaging in busywork. The followers of Jesus were “in irons”. We could say that the church today is “in irons”; after this pandemic we don’t know what the world will look like and what the church will be called to do and be. Jesus promises he will send the Spirit/the Comforter, the disciples and you and I today just need to be patient. The Spirit is a gift from God and there is nothing for us to do but wait for the Spirit’s coming. It was a good thing that Jesus promised to send them the Spirit of the living God while he was still living with the disciples; otherwise, if no one teaches you to expect the Spirit’s coming, you might despair and believe that the wind would never return.

Sailing Lesson #2: When an unexpected storm with fierce winds slaps you in the face, you might want to drop anchor and wait for direction. Deep in the midst of a storm, you cannot see the shoreline, a guiding star, no setting moon or rising sun. Drop anchor and hang on or find yourself a cove that is offers some protection. The best way to deal with storms is not around them, but hang on as you are tossed through them.

Sailing Lesson #3: Sometimes it is not possible to travel the shortest distance between point A and point B. Sometimes life doesn’t unfold in a straight linear line. Most times we are forced to take a zigzagging, “tacking” course as sailors say. We don’t lose sight of the goal, its just that the wind is in control and you might have to tack for a while. Tacking acknowledges the obstacles in getting to our destination, and adjusts the

sails and the course accordingly. Sometimes the helmsman and the mate might shift positions. And some of the journey's most delightful surprises come with a zigzagging course.

Sailing Lesson #4: Sometimes, even among the most experienced sailors, the wind gets the best of us, topples our boats, throws us overboard, where we discover how to tread water. In those situations, do not believe yourself to be invincible but reach out for help from passing sailors.

Sailing Lesson #5: It is best never to go sailing alone. Choose your helmsman or mates carefully. You may find yourself traveling with them for a while. I have discovered that the best traveling companions are those who are also attentive to the wind and not so interested in grand standing.

Richard Bode, author of "First You Have to Row a Little Boat" says: "To be at one with the wind/spirit is to be at home in the world, free of moral judgment, free from the need to control our lives. The sailor who refuses to abide by the wind sets his course by a mark on the land, a water tower, a lighthouse, a church steeple. He holds rigidly to that mark, the way a king clings to his crown or a zealot to his certitude, immune to the currents swirling about his head. He doesn't sail the wind; he sails his dogmas, and his dogmas deaden his senses, stripping him of his ability to see, to think, to feel, to respond. For all the helmsmen I know, he is the one with the least joy, because the light has gone out of him. They refuse to adapt; they adhere religiously to their rules, their regulations, their schedules. Why? Because they are like the sailor who has never learned to climb the wind."

Climbing the wind is sailing lesson #6. A boat can only sail at a 45 degree angle to the wind, so a good sailor pays attention to the way in which the wind is blowing and trims her sails to catch the wind. Listen to the wind and the wind, or Spirit of the living God, will tell us where to go. I hope we are not trying to sail by our dogmas and traditions but we are listening for the direction of the wind.

Pentecost is our reminder that God's Spirit continues to blow in our world, in our lives, especially during those wilderness times of our lives, setting us on fire, transforming our lives, turning our world upside down. The Spirit is not predictable. We cannot control it. Just when we believe that it has vanished completely, a breeze begins to gently stir. And if we want to be fools for Christ, we will learn to climb the wind!

And the breath of God blew from the four corners of the earth and brought life to that which was dead. Breath, Spirit, Ruach (Hebrew for the breath of God). The very same breath that created the world. The very same breath which is breathing in you and me.

Prayer of the People: Creator God, Spirit, in the beginning your spirit blew across the face of the waters and all that is came into being. We thank you for the beauty of your creation which surrounds us each day. Your spirit blew among those first disciples, empowering them, and us today, for ministry. We thank you for the fellowship of love which binds us to one another in Christ's name.

Rain upon our dry and dusty lives. Wash away our sin and heal our wounded spirits. Kindle within us the fire of your love to burn away our apathy. With your warmth, bend our rigidity and guide our feet. Give us bold tongues to speak up and speak your Word. Open our ears and arms so that we might live as a people made one in Christ. We pray that your Spirit will restore our anxious spirits.

In our labor, give us rest.

In our temptation, give us strength.

In our sorrow, give us consolation.

We pray for persons in need of healing. For leaders in need of direction. For lives in need of caring. We pray for those who need to be still and know that you are God. Help all of us to be patient in our waiting for your Spirit to blow through our lives. May we be attentive to the gentle breeze of your love and grace. We pray all these things in the name of your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ, who teaches us to pray together saying.....