

Winds of Change

sermon digest

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Acts 2:1-8,12-21

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Winds of change are blowing across the Arabic world of the Mideastern nations. Revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, dominating the news at the beginning of the year, are erupting in Bahrain, Lybia, Syria, and Yemen and threatening in Saudi Arabia. While we complain about the disruption of the oil supply and the increased cost of gasoline, blood flows in the streets of Lybia and Syria. Observers have noticed that this revolution is a youth movement against tyranny and corruption that have long dominated the Arabic Muslim nations. While parents and grandparents seem to have bowed to the inevitability of poverty and injustice, youth dream dreams and see visions of a different world.

Keep in mind that the jury is still out. Revolutions do not always result in a better world. The Russian revolution against the tyranny of the Czar and the Church gave birth to a military state with a change in personnel and government as bad or worse than before. Whether revolution is good or bad is judged by history. The best vision is always hindsight: "All's well that ends well." Meanwhile we wait to see the child born of this revolution.

Winds of change were beginning to stir in Jerusalem. The old Judaism was facing challenge from within. A Jewish carpenter from Nazareth had emerged out of the poverty and social distress brought on by Roman occupation and supported by the cooperation of Jewish leadership. Although some disciples fully expected Jesus to raise an army and go to war with Rome, he called for a very different kind of revolution—love for enemies and justice for the oppressed. Although he spoke truth to power, demanded that new wine could not be kept in old wineskins, and directly attacked the exploitation going on in the Temple courtyard, he refused to accept the sword even in an act of self-defense. His vision of change was called the Kingdom of God, a revolution of the spirit in which the rule of God would take the place of all human tyrants whether religious or political.

The brief ministry of Jesus of Nazareth came to an abrupt end on a hill outside of Jerusalem where three Jews were crucified under the judgment of the Roman Prefect Pontius Pilate. The threat of change was over, so it seemed. Life could return to the norm of death and taxes with the iron heel of Rome on the neck of the people, but that is not the judgment of history.

The first indication that a radical change was beginning to sweep through Judea came, according to our Gospels, with claims that Jesus of Nazareth had reached beyond the tomb. His death on a cross was more of a beginning than an end to the Jesus Kingdom. However you view the Christian claims of resurrection, something revolutionary occurred in the death of Jesus of Nazareth. The fact that we are here today gathered around the same gospel identified as followers of Jesus is continuing evidence of the miracle of Easter and Pentecost. The fact that death, even a crucifixion and the threat of further crucifixions, did not end the Jesus movement speaks to me of a greater power than Rome at work in the world.

The miracle of Pentecost was the emerging church. Luke described a dramatic gathering of disciples forty days after Easter morning, the Ascension of the risen Christ into the heavens. This was the turning point. The disciples were still looking for the overthrow of Rome and for God to deliver on the promise of a new political order, but they got their heads turned. The revolution was not going to be done *for* them but *through* them. Jesus promised, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Pentecost!

Bishop Desmond Tutu of Capetown, SA, once said that the story of Pentecost was "made up." I doubt that the good Bishop was accusing Luke of deliberate deception. The story is poorly represented as a photographic documentary of the events following fifty days after Easter, but the story is historical, about the effect of the life of the church on history. The revolution was less about the sight and sound described by Luke on the day of Pentecost than it was about the gathering of the nations around a common understanding and the inclusion of people responding to the message of hope in Christ.

Metaphors dominate our language about God. What happened here? John 20:22 describes Pentecost in limited terms: Jesus "breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit';" but even in John the words are symbolic. The Spirit of life in the church was "breathed" like God breathed

life into the first human.

Luke seems to be intentional in his use of metaphorical language to describe the miracle of Pentecost. The disciples experienced a sound “like the rush of a violent wind” and “divided tongues, as of fire.” The demand for facts that seems to dominate the scientific quest for truth leads to disappointment when we cannot get behind the words of obviously biased reporters who write in our New Testament. But the real picture depends less on the facts at hand than on the truth that emerges in history. Greatly oversimplified, the word is: *we are here; Pentecost happened*. The big truth, the ultimate truth, is always greater than the facts.

Anyone examining the facts of the matter fifty days after Easter would never have assumed the existence of the Jesus movement for another generation much less the emergence of a world religion. Beyond the surface sight and sounds of Pentecost was insight into the God who was in Christ. Beyond immediate picture was the vision of God at work in the world. Had someone been present with camera and recorder to gather the facts of the event, the result would not been an improvement on the interpretation of meaning recorded by Luke.

We place great stock in “calling a spade a spade” or “telling it like it is” without in the least recognizing that ultimate truth is totally beyond the reach of ordinary words. Einstein’s genius was his ability to look beyond the surface of things. His grasp of the physical nature of the world led to visionary ideas that could not be verified by the facts in his lifetime, but his theories of relativity have gradually transformed our understanding of the universe.

Ancient Jews recognized the importance of looking beyond the immediate facts to the ultimate truth about God. While neighbors were satisfied with gods they could fashion from stone or wood, the Jews moved on to a vision of the God of the universe, the Creator of all that exists. The prohibition to make idols was based on a basic faith perception: God cannot be contained in idols. God is greater than things; thus, God must also be greater than words can describe. When you try to shake down the profound language of the Bible into the facts of science, you not only distort truth of the matter, you also betray the intention of the ancient writers. The Jews envisioned the Creator God as “a wind from God swept over the face of the waters” of chaos (Genesis 1:1). Wind, breath, spirit flow out of the same Hebrew word *ruach* and similarly out of the same Greek word *pneuma*. Because God cannot be grasped by simple black-and-white factual language, the Jews resorted to metaphors. God is like Wind. Although the wind is not God, when a storm blows through Alabama, no one denies the reality of the wind or its tremendous power to move the things on this earth. The atmospheric movement of wind, like God, is invisible and mysterious. Jesus picks up on the metaphor in the conversation with Nicodemus (John 3:8): “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

The Synoptic Gospels agree that Jesus chose to teach through parables. He spoke to the imagination, to the vision of the soul that reaches far beyond what we can actually see or hear. He preferred to tell stories with double meaning, and metaphors are common in all of the Gospels.

In Acts, Luke used language that was familiar to his Jewish audience to speak of the movement of God in the world. Wind and fire had long been symbols of God’s invisible presence in power. The miracle of language reflects on the story of Babel in the Old Testament used to explain national and linguistic diversity on the earth, but the Spirit of Pentecost reverses Babel and brings people together in a common understanding. The Jews celebrated *Shavuot*, the giving of the Law through Moses fifty days after Passover; while Christians celebrate Pentecost, Greek for “the fifty days” after Easter. The revolution that did not come through fighting and killing Romans was coming through the presence of God among his people in Spirit. Daughters as well as sons shall prophesy, youth shall see visions, while old men dream dreams.

The winds of change are still blowing, but they seldom blow through the hardened institutions of either governments or religions. The same wind of God that empowered the life of the church continues to move in this world in our time. The unpredictable mystery of the Spirit of God is our hope that things can and do change and that changed people formed into community are the medium through which God works in this world.