

Just as there is always more than one way to look at God, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit- or Creator, Friend and Guide, there's also always more than one way to look at the holidays of the church -- the high Holy Days, and for us today, Pentecost. The conventional way we have heard about & understood the event of Pentecost is through the metaphor of wind... rushing into the Upper Room where the disciples & other followers of Jesus were, a driving wind with tongues of fire, which lit upon all those present, giving the power of ecstatic utterance. The holy power came down from above and then was expressed through the voices of those who were gathered, so that all those from far-off lands who spoke were understood by all.

The crowd was astonished, and after all was said and done, 3,000 people confessed faith in Christ and were baptized. It was a marvelous thing.

This description of the birth of the church is based on the Old Testament story of the giving of the Law, when Moses went upon the Mountain of God, Mt. Sinai. It was a very strange day, cloudy with a strong wind, and the people, scared to death- said to Moses, "We can't stand it anymore! You go up there and find out what God wants and come back and tell us." So Moses goes up the mountain, and there is violent wind and then fire.

When the author of Acts wants to describe the giving of the Holy Spirit to the church, he draws upon the story of Moses and the mountain, that powerful wind-driven moment in Israel's history. And still, even now, everywhere in the Christian world, Protestant, Catholic or Orthodox, where believers want to repeat or keep alive what Moses, and the Upper Room disciples experienced, it is called "Pentecostal."

But there is another Pentecost celebration- sandwiched between these two high-profile events, and it just might be more fitting and helpful for us this morning than the big-wind model.

It happened in a house in Jerusalem; with some of the disciples there- how many or which ones, we don't know. The door was locked because they are scared. Jesus had been put to death and now he's alive again. "What's going to happen to us?" They are intimidated, frightened. They'd locked the door, and though the door hadn't opened, suddenly, Christ is with them. He says, "Peace be with you," and they don't flinch- they don't respond, for they're not sure who this is, standing before them. Then he shows them

his hands and his side; his wounds, still raw- and they recognize him and are glad, relieved and assured. And Jesus says again what he first announced when he first saw them, "Peace be with you." Then he does something strange- quite out of the ordinary... Jesus breathes on them. This is not a strong, violent wind- his breath bursting forth like a Superman, but a gentle, very human breath, and with it a very human word: "receive the Holy Spirit."

This is *also* a Pentecost event, and it also draws on Old Testament imagery. Instead of the wind and thunder of Mt. Sinai, Jesus reenacts the creation story from Genesis; "God breathed into their nostrils, and they became living souls." Have you ever thought about Pentecost in that way?

If you don't experience the Holy Spirit as a great gust of wind in your life; as a wind whipping though your days- giving you ecstatic utterance, or lifting you off your feet; that's OK. There's always another way to look at God, for God cannot be captured in any image or any metaphor.

In fact, all this week I've had an altogether different notion of Pentecost in mind. And it comes from one of Jenn's children's sermons from a few weeks ago.

Do you remember when she took a glass of water, a piece of a bounty paper towel & a paper clip, and made that paper clip float on the water?

(Well- she never did make it work during the service- but it worked later on, and I went right home, tried it- and it did work!) The key to the trick is that the little bit of bounty paper towel is absorbent enough to cushion the impact of the paper clip on the water and provide enough **surface tension** to keep it from sinking.

Now- that's an image that works for me. So let me suggest as a metaphor for us today that the Holy Spirit provides us enough *surface tension* in life to keep us from drowning; the Holy Spirit helps us keep our heads above water- and even more than that, it provides us enough buoyancy to handle more challenges and burdens in life than we ever thought possible.

I am more and more coming to believe that the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in our world- as we pause to recognize it today- is to equip us to live in the necessary tension there is in the gap between our awareness of what life brings us and the faith we have of what might yet be. It is a gap that never has been and never will be closed, but we are kept there- suspended, if you will; held in tension on the surface of life- only able to

see what each new daybreak will bring, never any further. If we want to live in the Spirit, we have no choice but to learn to live in this surface tension, faithfully keeping a balance between the tension of reality and possibility; between what is and what yet may be.

The Spirit helps us to hold the tension between the reality of the moment and the possibility that something better might emerge.

And the Holy Spirit is by no means locked into an existence within the walls of a church.

As a human species, we are profoundly impatient with tensions of any sort, and we want to resolve every one of them as quickly as we can. Yet the Spirit provides us with the ‘surface tension’ of allowing us to live and thrive above the often complex and unresolved circumstances life presents us. In a business meeting, for example, the Spirit provides the staying power within a tension-filled dilemma of a deadlock about what to do and the possibility that a solution superior to any of those on the table might yet be found.

The Holy Spirit equips us with a variety of ways of holding tension. Take, for another example, the mother or father of a teenager-(especially as summer nears.) Parents often experience a tension between their hopes for a child and what is happening in that child’s life. When they don’t balance the tension between these two poles, they’re tugged one way or the other, either clinging to an idealized fantasy of who “their baby” is, smothering or over-controlling them, or pushing them further and further out of the way in self-defense of the bitter hurt of the anticipation of an empty nest soon to come. Both ways of responding reflect a lack of balance, and both are hurtful for parent and child alike. But many parents can testify that when they balance that tension in a way that opens their hearts, they serve their children well—and even more: they themselves become adults who are more open, more knowing, and more compassionate. The child who grows up in the force-field that lies between the paradoxical poles of hopeful vision and hard reality has a chance to thrive, and the parent who balances this paradox thrives along with the child.

I would contend that the Holy Spirit has much to do with this process- sight unseen; providing the ability for all involved to keep their heads above water in the storms, diatribes and sometimes turbulent winds of adolescence.

This dynamic applies equally well to all kinds of caring situations in life; whether you are the caregiver or care-receiver, whether you are waiting for a cure, celebrating a recovery, or just keeping on...

And, may I add, on this Memorial Day weekend, that the Spirit upholds, supports and sustains those who serve our country- and just as importantly, those who support and wait for them here at home.

The surface tension the Holy Spirit provides is more than a life-preserver; it is a life inspirer, giving deeper resources than imaginable to those who care for others in need and those who carry heavy burdens in life's journey.

I cannot fully describe the Holy Spirit. I cannot precisely explain the Spirit of God. Jesus himself said it is like a mystery, like the wind. You do not see the wind, and yet you know when it comes and when it goes.

One day I saw a tree standing tall and proud and straight, and it did not need anybody or anything. I passed it on another day and it was bent over and the top of it was almost touching the ground. I wondered, 'what caused that tree to bend so?'" - and someone said, 'the wind'.

I once saw Jenn's miracle children sermon happen- a paper clip suspended on the surface of the water. By all rights it should have sunk. But it didn't.

It wasn't wind that kept it afloat....but another silent, unseen force at work—surface tension.

More than once, I've seen a group of people come to find meaning, purpose, vision and direction together- and no big, blustery wind has been behind it. God's Holy Spirit can work without special effects- and the results can be astonishing and wonderful.

There can be really loud, bold, boisterous and unforgettable Pentecosts, like that described in the book of Acts, with winds, words and wonders, and all who try to be that way as church are called "Pentecostals."

But there can be other Pentecosts, too; the gentle, very human breath of Jesus on those he loved and those who place their trust in him, or the steady, persistent, faithful drumbeat of a life lived between the tension of what is and what yet can be.

Either way, any way- there's always more than one way to discern God's presence with us; opening us to new life and equipping us for the discipleship to which we're called, in Christ's name. Amen.