

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 5/27/07
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
Text: Acts 2:1-11; Pentecost

Where were you a week ago last Wednesday, when that sudden storm came up that did so much damage in Croton and neighboring communities? I was working at my computer at home, where a window in front of my desk looks out on trees and the Hudson River. I noticed the sound of the wind first, then saw leaves and twigs blowing around. I went upstairs to the living room and thought about going out onto the deck, but after watching for a minute from inside, I was actually too afraid. The wind was louder than I had ever remembered hearing it. The river was churning. The branches of the trees and the debris coming loose from them were flying upward, which was very strange to watch. Periodic flashes of lightning gave the leaves on the trees an eerie glow.

This powerful storm seemed to have come out of nowhere. It stopped as abruptly as it started. And it left in its wake downed utility poles, uprooted trees, damaged homes, and crushed cars.

Today's reading from the Book of Acts describes something similar. The setting of this story is in Jerusalem on the day of a Jewish religious festival called Pentecost, which in its earliest history celebrated the spring harvest, and later became an observance of God's gift of the Law on Mt. Sinai. According to this account from Acts, written at the end of the first century by the author of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' disciples were gathered together in a house, in prayer, waiting. The risen Christ had promised his followers that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them, enabling them to be Christ's witnesses "... to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

The spirit did come to them, suddenly and dramatically, accompanied by what sounded like a violent wind and felt like fire. Those who were present experienced the spirit's coming as forcefully as if the storm that hit Westchester had just blown through. But rather than the power of the wind being destructive, as it was here, it was wildly and unpredictably creative.

Jesus' followers who had gathered in that house were simple, unsophisticated Galileans. But with the anointing of the Holy Spirit, each one found himself or herself somehow able to speak in such a way that the other group of people in this story were able to hear and understand them.

This other group was a multitude of Jewish pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the festival of Pentecost from lands near and far – from the ends of the earth in their world view. They were apparently staying near the place where the disciples had gathered. Imagine the amazement of these foreign visitors as they were suddenly able to understand the native speakers. Because of the presence and the work of the Holy Spirit on that day and in that place, a connection was made between people who would have otherwise remained strangers.

A new reality was revealed to the disciples and to the visitors to Jerusalem, all of whom found themselves in the path of the creative power of the spirit. The differences of language and culture that separated them suddenly fell away. They could understand each other and be in relationship with each other – a relationship based on the extravagant love of God.

The church has come to celebrate the feast of Pentecost as its own beginning. It's an annual recognition that the presence and the power of God manifest in Jesus didn't disappear when his earthly life was over. The power of the Holy Spirit unleashed upon Jesus' followers in this story continues to be present and active in the lives of the people of God to this day. And what more important work could the spirit of God be about in our time than breaking down the barriers that separate one person from another; one group from another; one nation from another?

The Holy Spirit is present when differences arise between family members, between friends, between business associates. Our very breath reminds us that the wind of the Holy Spirit blows through and among us. In those moments when we're ready to react in anger or dismiss someone in cold silence, a momentary, grateful focus on the gift of the breath of life itself [the preacher pauses here and takes a deep breath, deliberately inhaling and exhaling] may create just enough room for the process of forgiveness to begin or allow just enough space for the seeds of understanding to take root. Day by day and one on one, we can practice the language of the spirit – a vocabulary that heals divisions and opens up possibilities.

Some of you know that our family recently returned from a trip to Viet Nam, where our youngest son was participating in a college semester abroad program. One morning we waited in line to visit the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum and Palace. Another line formed right beside us, this one for organized groups of tourists rather than for individuals like us. Into that line filed about forty men in their late fifties and early sixties, wearing khaki clothing and medals that identified them as former North Vietnamese soldiers. We made eye contact with those men standing beside us. We smiled. We bowed slightly toward each other. They had been our "enemy" in a war that had wreaked havoc on their nation and ours. And here we were, face to face, person to person, given the chance to make a connection. If only the practice of the language of mutual understanding took place before bombs are dropped, rather than after.

It is the gift of the spirit that inclines our hearts toward such understanding, and it is the same spirit that bestows the language and the opportunities that can bring it about. Today, as we celebrate the feast of Pentecost, may we recognize the presence and the movement of that wildly creative Holy Spirit of God in our midst and practice the spirit's language from which emerges mutual understanding, and through which strangers become friends. Amen.