

Scripture: Acts 2:1-4

This is Pentecost! It began as a Jewish festival that celebrated the wheat harvest, evolved in later Judaism to add a celebration of the giving of the torah – a confirmation of the covenant between God and the people of Israel. It was called the Feast of Booths - Shavuot. It was the first major festival after Passover – 50 days – hence the word “Pente” that called for the Jews of the diaspora – from many lands to gather in Jerusalem. It was an unabashedly joyous festival. It was a celebration of Thanksgiving. Shavuot was one of the 3 festivals that required Jews to return to Jerusalem to celebrate the holiday properly in the Temple, so the city was jammed with people from almost unpronounceable countries speaking dozens of languages. It was a very popular festival – sort of a long Thanksgiving weekend and a family reunion rolled up together – and everyone ate and drank with gusto.

Since Pentecost was so soon on the heels of Passover, it wasn't uncommon that people from far-flung places would just remain in Jerusalem then return home after Shavuot. According to the story in the book of Acts, some 120 disciples of Jesus, had stayed on in Jerusalem. And while, on the one hand, they may have been among those who would say they were waiting for Shavuot, the gospels of John & Luke tell us that Jesus had instructed the disciples to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the arrival of the Helper that Jesus promised God would send to them.

So that Pentecost morning, the followers of Jesus were gathered in traditional Shavuot prayer and study when the Spirit of God suddenly descended upon them. In the reading this morning Luke describes "the blowing of a violent wind" and "tongues of fire" dancing throughout the room, and before too long, the disciples began to speak out – exuberantly proclaiming the mighty works of God and blowing the minds of all the people on the street as they heard “simple Galileans” somehow speaking in their own languages. The Message describes the passersby as “thunderstruck” – “they couldn't for the life of them figure out what was going on”!

In the Christian tradition, Pentecost is a feast of the mysterious movement of the Spirit of God. Each year it is an invitation to be attentive once more to God's presence in our lives, individually and corporately. The Spirit of God

came as unexpectedly as a wind in the mountains upon the followers of Jesus. A rushing wind blowing in a fresh spirit having life changing effects.

Where is that spirit blowing today. I've heard some of you talking about the spirit of this place – SBCC – that there has been a spirit of renewal this year – a fresh spirit – a growing spirit. What are the signs? There are several – new activity, ideas bubbling up, laughter but where do I notice it most? The noise level of coffee hour! Conversations are buzzing and that's a good thing! We even had to contain some of that spirit at the beginning of the service by adding a new quiet ritual so we can be listening for God's spirit in our midst.

Well, for those early disciples, it was a wild day. In the upper room or other secret spaces where they had been hiding out for weeks, waiting for the promised power of the Holy Spirit, their thoughts were dominated more by terror than by faith. As good Jews, they dared to step out for this festival of booths and were they surprised! It unleashed within them an immense freedom and a deep sense of God's working within them. It was uncontrolled and unplanned – the last thing that their sad and fearful hearts ever expected.

In the chaos, the Spirit of God came with an energy beyond their boldest imagination. This coming changed their attitudes and motivated them with enthusiasm and hope. They moved from being weak and discouraged to being people with an inner vitality. They discovered a dynamic power of love and a new determination to live out what Jesus had proclaimed to them.

We need to stay attuned to the movement of this Spirit if we too are to hear the call to transformation or deeper growth. My Pentecosts are rarely large, powerful gales; rather they are usually little gusts that changed by life little by little. I recall the words of Elijah as he awaited some sign from God – God was not in the thunder, not in the earthquake, but rather a still small voice – that's at least how one translation describes it.

But this morning, let's stay with the wild! We hear again about the crowd gathering in the temple courtyard in Jerusalem. If we pause a moment to listen, we hear dozens of different languages around us, a delicious cacophony of sound. This is a visual feast as well, with women and men from diverse nations sporting their finest ethnic costumes in celebration. It is described as if tongues of fire came and touched each of them. I found these

wonderful scarfs at General Conference. I wish I could have bought enough for all of us to be waving them this morning.

On this Mother's day, let's take a different look at the scene. As we scan the crowd, we're looking for mothers. Do you see the Egyptian woman over there, her row upon row of gold necklaces set off by the rich browns and oranges of her dress? The baby she holds in a sling across her belly is fat and laugh-ing. A two-year-old boy hangs onto her skirt, tugging at his lower lip petulantly. Across the way an ancient Mesopotamian grandmother leans heavily on her walking stick, the hem of her rough-woven tunic dragging in the dirt of the courtyard as she limps along. Do the deeply etched lines of her face tell a story of loss and suffering? Or is she just profoundly tired?

The followers of Jesus are here this morning. We're surprised to see that there are as many women as men. Are there mothers among them?

Ah. There is one we recognize. Mary, the mother of Jesus. She walks with the others, but seems distracted. As we watch, a younger woman takes Mary's arm affectionately to walk with her, the young one leaning her head sideways on Mary's shoulder. We see Mary smile absently. Her mind seems to be elsewhere. Though she seems peaceful, her eyes have a haunted, empty look. What sort of courage, determination do you suppose it takes for her to be here at all? All of his followers have experienced Jesus' brutal death. All of them suffer exquisitely the tangible loss of him in their midst. Is the suffering magnified beyond reckoning for his mother? Do you suppose she is tempted this morning to turn back? To just walk out of Jerusalem and find her way to some quiet Galilean village and draw herself in – away from the agony of her memories?

Wait. Listen. What is that sound? Wind? A violent wind! All around the court-yard tunics and dresses and headscarves are whipped by this bluster of air. Jesus' followers seem especially affected, one after another of them sensing such a fiery presence that later they will remember seeing actual tongues of flame resting one another. Many of them press both hands to their chest and gasp in response to the fullness that floods them. Spirit? Yes! Of course! Jesus had promised that they would be baptized by the Spirit. Ahhhh!!! This must be what he meant – this fullness. But something else as well.

What? Their fear has vanished! Blown to the wind's twelve quarters!
Their grieving, aching emptiness is filled with... God, Presence!

Look at Mary now. She glows! Like all of his followers, she moves now among the crowd of foreigners telling her son's story. She is a woman on fire! A small crowd gathers around her, enthralled by the tale. How does the Egyptian mother understand her? She does not speak Mary's Aramaic! Why is the old grandmother with the lined face smiling so?

Look. Look! All around us the followers of Jesus are talking boldly to eager listeners. Women and men of every nationality hear the Good News in their own native tongue. There are such high spirits afoot in this place that the cynics sneer, "These people are drunk!" But before the end of this day three thousand souls will ask to be baptized.

Do you see them gathering in? Let's look for the mothers here in this first-century Jerusalem courtyard that opens up onto all time. Do you see all the mothers, like Mary, who have lost sons and daughters – to violence, to war? Do you see among these women Somali mothers and Iragi mothers and the mothers of Afghanistan? Do you see the mothers of America who barely dare ask their agonized, "Why?!"? Behind them are the ghosts of endless generations of mothers who have suffered such losses. What courage it takes for these women to put one foot in front of another, to come into this flame-lit space and let Spirit fill them with consoling peace. At General Conference, I heard Celeste Zappala tell of the death of her son four years ago in the search for "weapons of mass destruction" that we know now did not exist. Indeed, we hear those mothers who come to the courtyard grieving.

Some mothers come into this temple courtyard singing. Their children dance around them happily as Spirit fills them with hope and joy, with visions of a bright future. We celebrate with their joy.

But the wind of Spirit also spins them around to see the other mothers who come – the broken and lonely and inept and unloved ones. Those for whom motherhood has been desperately hard. Spirit fills these as well, breathing into them just as much love and acceptance as they can hold.

We remember those whose children have died before them. Its just not suppose to happen that way. We remember those who have wanted children but have not been able to conceive.

A hush falls over this courtyard now. There is another group who have entered the courtyard. Through the spacious temple gate now come thousands of mothers wailing. We turn to them. These are the mothers of Burma, Myanmar. They fear the wind in this place, so Spirit softens herself for their sake and wraps each of these grieving mothers with gentle, soothing eddies of care. Spirit pours courage into their souls as well, knowing that they still have much to endure. And She nudges all of us – mothers, fathers, sons, daughters – to open our hearts in prayer and compassion for our sisters, the mothers of Burma.

Scattered about this courtyard are grandmothers as well. When Spirit tries to visit them with her fullness and flame, She finds most of them so full already with delight that She blows one more gust of laughter into their hearts, then moves on.

Pentecost is breaking down the walls of the cocoon of despair and fear. Pentecost is the powerful entry of the Holy Spirit in our lives to rearrange our world in surprising new ways. It opens the possibilities of understanding those of other cultures, other faiths, other languages with a language of heart and passion. Pentecost is the invasion of God's time – Spirit and we celebrate our interconnectedness in both grief and joy.

Before the end of this Pentecost day, I say again, three thousand souls will ask to be baptized. Will we let Spirit so fill us that we too might step out boldly as followers of Jesus to lure others into Love's realm?

Before the end of this Mother's Day, may we remember with love and thanksgiving that it takes courage to be a mother. And may we thank God for the women who gave us birth and the women who had the moxie to mother us. Amen.