

“Windy with a Chance of ...”  
John 15:26-27, 16:13-15

A joke is told about two Canadians talking about their summers. One asks the other: “Hi, did you have a good Summer?” The other responds by saying, “Yes, indeed, we had a great picnic that afternoon!!!”

I hope our summer is a little longer here! But as we speak about weather I would like us to think about our spiritual weather forecast. Today the weather forecast is windy with a chance of anything. Today is Pentecost when we celebrate the wind of the Spirit blowing freely among us. This is the same Spirit that gave birth to the church, led the disciples to continue the ministry of Jesus and is continuing to lead us today on our journey of faith.

I think the image of the wind for the Spirit of God is a very appropriate one because it is one of those things that we, as human beings, can't see but we know is there. We can feel its impact and power. Yet, we cannot physically touch or contain it. Another important image that we can celebrate on this Pentecost Sunday is the one found in our second scripture reading from John 15. This is image of the Holy Spirit as the Advocate. We are comfortable or at least familiar with the image of the wind, but what about this advocate? What does it really mean to us?

The word for Advocate in the Greek is the “Paraclete.” That is a highly technical word, and one that profoundly states the essential work of the Holy Spirit. The word “Paraclete” literally means, “one called to the side” of another. It is primarily a legal term. In the Roman courts, a person didn't hire an attorney who would present the defense of a client. Instead, each person was expected to defend one's self (in essence, being one's own lawyer) but with the help of a “Paraclete.” The Paraclete, who would be an expert in Roman law, would literally sit next to the defendant who was on trial and would advise him how to present his own case. He was one who had been “called to the side of” the defendant and coached him in presenting his case.

What an image for God's presence with us! Imagine the power of such an image. God is our “Paraclete,” the one who sits or walks besides us as a gentle and guiding presence. This was especially important for the early church, the community of the Gospel of John. They were experiencing persecution and rejection. The price of following Jesus Christ was high. So, this assurance that the Advocate was walking with them was central to their faith. God as our Advocate is not taking us out of the troubles and struggles of life, but is instead walking with us and guiding our steps. Sometimes it is hard to see and experience God's presence because our expectations can blind us. We expect God in the judge's seat, or the lawyer's seat, or even the prosecution seat but rarely on the side quietly advising and guiding. That just does not seem powerful enough. There is a short poem about God's presence that rings true to our experiences and biblical witness:

A man whispered, “God speak to me!”  
and a bird laughed. But the man didn't hear.  
So the man called out, “God speak to me!”  
and thunder rolled across the sky. But the man didn't listen.  
The man looked around and said, “God let me see you!”  
and a star shone brightly. But the man didn't see.  
Despairingly the man said, “God show me a miracle”  
and a life was born. But the man didn't notice.  
Desperate now, the man said, “Love me God”,  
and his wife smiled at him. But that was so normal, he missed it.

Feeling completely alone he whispered into the heavens,  
"Touch me God and let me know you are here!"  
God reached down and touched the man.  
But the man brushed the butterfly away and went sadly on his way.

We are often looking for God in the wrong places and in the wrong ways. Even our concepts of prayer can often mislead us. Prayer is not God needing reminders to care about us, but prayer is about our deep relationship with God, the one who is on our side. The 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher and theologian, Soren Kierkegaard wrote this about prayer, "The function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays." We so desperately need this kind of change in our lives and in the world.

So, today I invite you to reflect on the mystery of the gentleness of this image of God and to pay attention to your spiritual weather forecast. Is the wind of the Spirit blowing in your life? If so, what is it bringing to you and to the world around?

These are critical questions for us as Christians on the day of Pentecost because they not only influence our personal faith but also our relationship with all of humanity. Our biblical stories show that with the building of the tower of Babel in Genesis, people saw the different languages as a hindrance to understanding each other. Yet, with Pentecost we celebrate that we do have different languages and cultures, yet we have a common bond, an Advocate, that helps us reach out to connect with others in love. In his book, *In the Name of Identity*, Amin Maalouf, the French Lebanese writer, writes about three stages in our human history, "During the first, which corresponds to prehistory, communications were extremely slow...In the second period, knowledge developed at a much faster rate than the means of disseminating it, so that in every field human societies grew more and more different from one another. This phase lasted for several thousand years, which corresponds to what we call History. Then, quite recently, a third period has begun, in which although knowledge certainly advances more and more rapidly, the dissemination of knowledge progresses even faster, with the result that human societies are likely to become less and less differentiated from one another." But we still have the need to be unique so that our identity is not reduced to the lowest common denominator. I believe that the Spirit of God is working in and around us to bring us to better connections as human beings we are connected through our love, but the key is to pay attention and to listen. A great recent example is in the story of the western Pacific Ocean nation of the Solomon Islands, when rival ethnic factions attended a reconciliation conference hosted by the peace group "Winds of Change." The Solomon Islands is a nation comprised of over 1,000 islands inhabited by differing Melanesian clan groups. You might remember the Solomons from World War II. Bitter infighting, flamed by gang violence, has left the Solomons divided. The situation escalated into armed conflict in 1998. Central to the recent peace conference was the participation of Desmond Tutu, 77-year-old retired Anglican Archbishop from South Africa. Tutu launched a South-African style "Truth and Reconciliation Commission." Such a commission has been essential in the healing after the overthrow of the apartheid system that divided his country. Now that same model will be used in the Solomons to hear the stories, offer reconciliation, and forge a lasting peace.

Speaking to a crowd of thousands in the national football stadium in the capital Honiara, Archbishop Tutu said that the Solomon Islands has a clear choice to make—either forgive and move forward or stay locked in bitter hatred and reap the consequences: "Look at Sudan and Somalia in Africa, look at what is happening in Sri Lanka...that is what happens when there is no peace...the people suffer, the country suffers."

In a dramatic personal display of the new peace, former gang leader Andrew Fioga spoke of transformation and hope and said, "Since I and others started the war, I will also start the healing process. I am now a changed man and I'm ready to forgive those who killed my father, because I have surrendered my life to God, who replaced that spirit of unforgiveness with that of a forgiven heart. That spirit of hurt and revenge is no more in me." This is the amazing and transforming power of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Today's weather forecast is "Windy with a chance of..." and you fill the blank. This is the weather prediction for our faith. Every day is filled with the Spirit of God and we walk every day with the potential to pay attention to the Spirit of God or to act as if we are on our own. What is your relationship to the Spirit? How is God present to you? Is God present to you today in the joining of the community of faith as it is the experience of our confirmands? Is God present to you today through, music, art, words, the bread and cup of communion? What is your relationship with the Spirit everyday? Do you know that you have an Advocate? Do you act like it every day? As you consider these questions today, I would like to invite you to a simple prayer experience that is from a book called *Birthings and Blessings* by Gail Ricciuti and Rosemary Mitchell. This may not work for you, but I invite you to this time of guided imagery and prayer. You may choose to close your eyes so that you are not distracted by looking around.

Meditation: With your inner eye, envision the person or community who most bring joy to you by their presence in your life.

Prayer: Spirit of joy, through you Christ lives in us, and we in Christ.

Meditation: Now picture one person who has taught you most about the power of love, and sense the fullness of your gratitude to her/him.

Prayer: Spirit of love, you bind us in love to yourself and to those around us. In marriage, and partnership, in family and friendship we live out your love.

Meditation: Allow all your senses to be open to the presence of the community surrounding you—seen and unseen, those living and those who have gone on ahead of us.

Prayer: Spirit of the body of Christ, you unite us into a community of faith through your lifegiving grace and hope.

Meditation: Now, in silence, imagine and invoke the disparate peoples of the earth, especially those who struggle against oppression and want and be aware of them as being your own flesh and blood.

Prayer: Spirit in the world, you comfort us and draw us into closer relationship with one another.

Meditation: Finally, focus your mind's eye on a candle flame. See it first located in your heart, then surrounding you. Watch as the flame dances and leaps, as an unseen breeze swirls around it, and be aware that the flame and the wind are the presence of God's love.

Prayer: As the flame rises free with light and warmth, we receive the gift of life. As the wind moves and dances round the earth, we receive the gracious gift of the spirit. Amen.