

# Blow, Spirit, Blow

sermon digest

June 8, 2014

Acts 8:26-39

carolyn dipboye

It is, to be sure, a story. Notice I did not say *only* a story, for stories are often how we learn who we are. Stories help us to get our bearings in life and give us a means of interpreting the world around us or, better, give us a glimpse of how we proceed in navigating that world. Remember The Little Train That Could that taught us as small children the importance of keeping on keeping on even when the task seems overwhelming? Remember George Washington chopping down the cherry tree and the importance of telling the truth? How about the stories of religious and political persecution that led to the founding of a country bound by the sacred trust of equality, freedom and justice for all? We learn who we are culturally, politically and religiously by looking to the stories that hold us together and place upon each succeeding generation the responsibility for carrying forward the torch of our deepest values and our highest aspirations.

The Acts of the Apostles is just such a story. Seemingly the work of the same hand that authored the Gospel of Luke, it is the work of one recognized as particularly good at his craft. He is masterful in the way he spins the story of Jesus in his first volume, the Gospel of Luke. His stories are intricately developed, continuous, and saturated with meaning. He places what are probably our most beloved parables on the lips of Jesus, parables that are found no where else—the parable we call the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the Rich Man and Lazarus. So be sure, when we turn to Acts, we are not turning to merely a dry rendition of history nor to out-and-out fanciful fabrications. When we turn to Acts, we are turning to one overarching story about how the church, the body of Christ came to be and how one story spins into another in the surprising turns of God’s Spirit. Acts is the story of the movement of a tiny band of believers buoyed and sustained by an amazing sense of purpose; but more, it is about the Spirit of God surging forth unhindered by human boundaries and divisions as it reaches out to welcome and embrace some of the most unlikely and surprising of God’s children.

The story begins with the barest of outlines: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you,” Jesus assures those gathered for his final words; “and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” And then in short order, Luke proceeds to spell out how it all unfolded as in rapid succession. Pentecost, the bestowing of God’s Spirit, happens time and time again. The story, you see, is not just about what happened back then and back there. It is the story about how God’s Spirit acted and acts. It signals clues twenty-one centuries later to what we should look for and expect, or better, *not* expect.

It begins with a *Jerusalem* Pentecost. Remember what we refer to as “the day of Pentecost”? Meaning literally *fifty days*, it was a Jewish festival, one of three summoning attendance in Jerusalem. It had agricultural significance, marking the end of the spring harvest, and deep roots in Israel’s salvation history, marking fifty days from Passover and the gift of God’s law to Moses on Mount Sinai. For Christians, it marks a traditional fifty days from the resurrection of the Christ. Luke describes it in terms of blowing wind and tongues of fire, recalling the wind (Spirit) of God moving across the waters of chaos in Creation and the fire of God’s presence in the burning bush and then in the pillar of fire which provided direction in the Exodus. Pentecost, you might say, is the reversal of Babel, the story where humanity is pictured as fragmenting into hostile and divided camps. Pentecost, like the stories of Creation and Exodus, was the story of God building community, extending community, welcoming those who would come into a new community of fellowship with God. Some call it the birthday of the church.

Pentecost, however, is an unfolding story. It doesn’t just happen once. It happens again and again as the church is led by God’s Spirit to extend community and gather at its table a dizzying array of those of God’s children previously beyond the pale of its embrace. Philip, initially chosen to distribute food among the church’s widows in Jerusalem, finds himself preaching in the city of Samaria. Shockingly successful, his message reaches masses of a people despised for their racial and religious impurity. These so-called “lost sheep of Israel” account for another Pentecost, the *Samaritan* Pentecost as God’s Spirit is poured out upon them.

Led down the road toward Gaza, Philip reaches out to an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in service to the Candace or the queen. Reading the significant Suffering Servant passage in Isaiah 53, the eunuch seeks Philip’s interpretation. Perhaps in reality the eunuch has also read a few chapters farther where Isaiah anticipates the day when foreigners and even eunuchs will receive welcome and full

inclusion in God's community: "Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered" (Isaiah 56:8). If the eunuch had not read this far, Philip had; and he acts in full accord with God's promised future. No more relegated to the outskirts of the Temple, the eunuch on receiving God's Spirit finds his place at the table of welcome; and goes on his way rejoicing. Enter the "stunned-by-the-Spirit" Simon Peter. He finds himself led, of all places, into the living room of Cornelius, a Roman centurion; and shockingly a *Gentile* Pentecost unfolds. Travel then with Paul to Ephesus, literally at "the ends of the [known and familiar] earth". Experience there the overwhelming outpouring of God's Spirit and celebrate with him the *Ephesian* Pentecost.

Don't assume, however, that Pentecost is just about Bible and Bible stories. Don't assume it is just way back there, having little to do with the here and now. Follow its progression as the church moves from one continent to another. Recognize its flowering in the Protestant Reformation, in the Great Awakening, in the birth of Nazi Germany's Confessing Church, and in the church's unfolding witness as one seemingly impenetrable barrier after another falls in its wake. See it in the church's belated entry into the struggle for racial justice. See it as the church moves beyond ancient bias and prohibition to welcome as full members those who are LGBTQ. See it as the church, sometimes little bitty portions of the church, throws its efforts into the ongoing struggle for justice and equality of every generation in every time and place.

Pentecost, you see, is about the leveling of walls of hostility. It is about extending God's full welcome here and now in every time and place. Coming to the end of his story, Luke pictures Paul in Rome, "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and *without hindrance*" (28:30). Concluding his study of the book of Acts some years ago, our esteemed teacher and friend, the late New Testament scholar Frank Stagg, observed here the key to understanding Acts and the key to understanding the intended character of Christ's church. Like the wind Jesus describes in his conversation with Nicodemus, the wind of God's Spirit goes where it will. The question for Christ's church: will we go there as well? Always the church must be asking, where is the Spirit bidding us today? Where will the new Pentecost unfold?

In June 1911 a gathering of sponsors concerned to foster a Pentecost among the younger generations in our country launched a new endeavor called the "Wild Goose Festival." Launched by a diversity of individuals and groups, including the Alliance of Baptists, the festival has joined hands with religious publishing companies, social justice ministries, theological schools, and various media and music groups to gather "at the intersection of justice, spirituality, music, and art." Some 1700 showed up at the improvised outdoor camping site in the North Carolina hills that first summer, and their numbers have continued to grow. In the festival sponsors' own words, they gather to sing, learn, teach, argue, pray, eat, dance, and imagine a new world.

The Wild Goose community experience takes its name from an ancient metaphor for the Holy Spirit, traceable to ancient Celtic Christianity. Rather than a gentle dove, the Holy Spirit is depicted on the order of a big, gray goose—"wild, unruly, coming and going as it pleases, announcing its arrival with honking, bluster, and ample attitude." ["Chasing the Wild Goose," *Sojourners*, June 2012]. Those gathering for the camp meeting are not asked to fit into a narrow profile as if the Spirit is somehow limited in its ability to work with a narrowly defined population. They are welcomed into the wide open spaces and challenged to follow the Spirit of God in its liberating course of establishing community, openness and welcome where none has existed before.

That is the way it is with Pentecost, you see. It is not about traveling the same familiar paths we have known before. Pentecost is about the venturesome risk of flinging wide the doors of the church and moving out of our huddled, fearsome masses. It is about flinging wide the doors of our hearts to welcome the stranger, the poor and the marginalized. Pentecost unfolds, in other words, as we know ourselves grasped in the wide reach of God's love and find ourselves so freed that the wind of God's spirit can blow us where it will.

In keeping with the Spirit of Pentecost, blow, Spirit, blow; and open us to the wide love and freedom of your embrace. Amen.