

Pentecost Sunday, Year C
June 9, 2019
St. James, Wheat Ridge

By the Rev. Becky Jones

It came in the night, snapping trees like chopsticks.

Early on the morning of Jan. 27, 2018,
more than 100 gigantic old-growth trees
fell on the shore of Lake Quinalt,
in Olympic National Park,
about 50 miles west of Seattle.

The thud of the trees falling, about 1:30 in the morning,
was strong enough to register as a small earthquake,
according to a seismic monitor.

The line of fallen, splintered trees stretched for half a mile.
Officials in the park thought it had to be some sort of wind
that blew down the trees,
but nearby weather stations reported only light breezes.
And radar didn't show any storms.

So the possible explanations started getting stranger.
Could it have been experimental military equipment?
A freak tornado?
A microburst?
A falling meteor?
An angry sasquatch?
Scientists were baffled.

Finally, meteorologists settled on a *possible* explanation.
They think it's possible that a warm front approached from the south
and moved over the cool surface air above the lake,
causing air pressure to drop,
and because conditions were just right,
the wind over the lake began to rotate,
faster and faster, and for a brief moment,
the rotations got so strong, it knocked over those trees.

Maybe.

The truth is, nobody is sure what happened
at Lake Quinalt a year and a half ago.

Because nobody was there to see what actually happened,
so we can only speculate.

Which really does beg the question:

If a hundred trees fall in a forest
but there's nobody there to see it,
do they make a sound?

We like to have things explained.

We don't much care for mysteries.

We especially want to have bizarre things explained.

We want things to make sense.

But I'll be honest with you:

I sort of liked that fallen tree story better
when an angry sasquatch
was still in the running as a possible cause.
Knowing that it was a simple if rare
combination of natural weather conditions
that produced the tree fall
sort of robs the story of some of its power.

In our lesson this morning about Pentecost,
when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the disciples,
we're told that that, too, involved something
that sounded like a great rushing wind,
and looked like tongues of fire.
It was a noisy, stunning mysterious event.

And we no sooner get past this mystery
than we're led straight into another one:
The disciples find themselves starting to speak
in different languages.

The crowd outside is so perplexed by this amazing turn of events
that they accuse the disciples of being drunk.
Because that's the only explanation they can come up with
that seems to make any sense.
It may not be a satisfying explanation,
But at least it fit into their concept of how the world worked.

I wonder how many of us,
had we been in the crowd at the Temple that long-ago morning,
would have jumped to the same sort of conclusion.
Because even now,
2,000 years later,
we don't quite know what to make of the Holy Spirit.

When we DO give a thought to the Spirit,
we like to make that spirit quiet, gentle, comforting.
We like still, small voices that whisper in our heart,
with sighs too deep for words.
We would confine the Holy Spirit to being
a gentle breeze that soothes our troubled souls.
Because we are Episcopalians.

The problem is that the Holy Spirit we meet on Pentecost
blows the doors off the building.
This spirit lights up the room like a Roman Candle,
and leaves the disciples babbling on
in languages none of them know how to speak.
This is the Holy Spirit of our Pentecostal brothers and sisters.

I'm not sure any of us polite Episcopalians
are really craving that sort of experience of the Holy Spirit.
We don't want people questioning our sobriety –
let alone our sanity –
after we've been in church.
But there it is: One Spirit, experienced in dramatically different ways.
There's no explaining that.

So Peter gets up,
and he gives a speech that doesn't *try* to explain away
the astounding and mysterious things that have just happened.

He doesn't say
"Okay, calm down everybody.
What we've all just been through has a simple scientific explanation."

No, what he says
is that the Holy Spirit has just turned the world upside down;
that ancient Biblical prophecies have just been fulfilled.
And hang onto your hat,
because God is just getting started.
You think what you saw this morning was amazing?
Well, let me tell you,
watch your seismic monitors,
because we're getting ready to shake the world."

Sometimes things happen that we simply cannot explain.
Not even now, in the 21st century,
with all our reliance on empiricism and scientific inquiry.
We still don't know the answer to every question.
Sometimes, we don't even know what questions to ask.

But here is the good news for 21st century Christians.
The same Spirit that hovered over the heads of those first disciples
and inspired their tongues to speak different languages,
is also looking to inspire a rebirth within us now.

The same spirit that emboldened prophets of old
to speak of blood and fire and smoky mist
is today breaking into our smoky, misty consciousness,
and sending us out as ambassadors of a renewed earth.

We who are lucky enough to live in the 21st century
are experiencing a time of great upheaval in matters of faith,
just as those who were witnesses to that first Day of Pentecost
were soon to see a great upheaval of the faith
that had carried them and their ancestors along for generations.
But that wasn't a bad thing.
That was an incredibly good thing.

This, too, is a time for our sons and daughters to prophesy,
and for our old to see visions.

Because today's outpouring of the spirit
is once again
overwhelming our old-growth, preconceived notions
of who and what God is,
and is calling us all to be co-creators
of a more expansive, more inclusive reign of God
than any generation before us could have imagined.

We cannot and should not attempt to protect
those old-growth trees lining our hearts,
screening out those who in the past
were deemed unworthy.
No, the spirit comes along and snaps those old prejudices like chopsticks.

Whether we like our Holy Spirit to come quietly,
speaking to the mystic in all of us,
or to come boldly and awesomely,
we know that the Spirit *comes*.
And however it comes,
it breaks down barriers,
welcomes outsiders,
reconciles broken relationships,
and energizes our own spirits.
It offers inspiration and salvation to all,
and always in whatever language we can understand.

God's spirit liberates us from fear,
and invites us to create along with God.
It awakens us to new possibilities,
and encourages us to achieve our dreams
and to support the dreams of others.

If a tree falls in the forest,
And there's no one there,
Does that mean it makes no sound?

If the Spirit comes,
and the eyes of the world do not behold it,
does that mean the spirit is not there,
quietly working to renew the whole Creation?

Jesus told us that the world cannot receive the spirit of Truth
because it neither sees nor knows this spirit.

But we, his disciples, know this Spirit.

This Spirit abides with us,
in our thoughts +, and on our lips +, and in our hearts +,
calling on us to change the world.

And in case anybody is wondering,
we are not drunk.

Amen.