

The Winds of Change

(Acts 2:1-21)

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
Pentecost Sunday, June 9, 2019

In the name of the one God: creator; redeemer; and sustainer. Amen.

Between 1940 and 1942, in the midst of the Second World War and the bombing campaign being waged against England, the poet T. S. Eliot composed the final three parts of his famous *Four Quartets*. These three – “East Coker,” “The Dry Salvages,” and “Little Gidding” – came in a period beginning four years after the first poem in the quartet, “Burnt Norton,” had been published.

It is the last, “Little Gidding,” that I think of on this day, ever since having taken a course on the poetry of Eliot during seminary. The fourth section of the poem in particular weaves together the horrors of war that Eliot and so many others witnessed on a daily basis with the Pentecostal theme of the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Here are the words from that section:

*The dove descending breaks the air
With flame of incandescent terror
Of which the tongues declare
The one discharge from sin and error.
The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre –
To be redeemed from fire by fire.*

*Who then devised the torment? Love.
Love is the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.
We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.¹*

It is powerful imagery: the peace of a dove standing in stark contrast to the terror of flame, and the choice of “either fire or fire” originating from a root of love. And it is without question a poem in which you can dwell for a long period of time, exploring the sources on which Eliot drew and returning time and again to see what new meanings and interpretations arise.

¹ “Little Gidding” (Number 4 of ‘Four Quartets’). <http://www.davidgorman.com/4Quartets/4-gidding.htm>

At the beginning of this section of the poem and again at the end, **there is fire**. But on that first Pentecost Sunday the **fire** was **not first**. As we heard in the passage from Acts, before the tongues of flame there was a noise ... “a sound like the rush of a violent wind.”² What a powerful, awesome, unsettling choice of words: **the rush of a violent wind**. Without question, the idea of a violent wind certainly has a different connotation in our modern world ... something we often equate with the hurricanes and tornadoes and strong storms that frequently arise, alter landscapes and change lives.

I took time to explore several other translations of this particular phrase. The King James Version has “a rushing mighty wind”; the Darby Translation states it is “a violent impetuous blowing”; the Common English Version gives it as “the howling of a fierce wind.”³ And finally I went to the original Greek, and there it was in its literal translation: “And came suddenly out of heaven a sound like rushing of a wind violent.”⁴

Sudden. Violent. Something that is not there and then in instant **fills** the entire house. A moment in which there is a swift move from quiet to chaotic. Imagine for a moment the reaction of those gathered in that house. **Fear. Awe. Amazement. Wonder. Questioning.**

But I also cannot help but think that there may have been some recognition of the importance of the sound and the wind as signals that things are about to change ... and change **dramatically**. They would likely have been familiar with the many moments throughout the Hebrew Scriptures in which wind was an indicator of an impending shift in the status quo. In some instances they would have known that the wind itself **was** the change.

Consider if you will a few examples. In Genesis, for instance, it was a wind sent by God that blew over the earth and caused the waters to subside after the flood.⁵ In Exodus, it was a wind from the east that blew all day and night and brought the plague of locusts onto Egypt.⁶ The psalmist tells of the stormy wind fulfilling the command of the Lord.⁷ And the prophet Jonah, trying to flee from the command of God to go Nineveh, was confronted by a great wind and storm that threatened to sink the ship on which he was traveling.⁸

The disciples themselves would have remembered their own first-person experiences. They may have recalled being in a boat that was pounded by waves and pushed by a strong wind just hours after they had witnessed – in a much calmer setting – Jesus miraculously feeding a crowd of thousands.⁹ In a separate Gospel narrative, a windstorm came up and threatened to swamp a boat in which Jesus was asleep in the stern.¹⁰

² Acts 2:2 (NRSV).

³ “Compare Translations for Acts 2:2.” <https://www.biblestudytools.com/acts/2-2-compare.html>

⁴ Acts 2:2. Greek Interlinear Bible, on BibleHub. <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/acts/2-2.htm>

⁵ Genesis 8:1.

⁶ Exodus 10:13.

⁷ Psalm 148:8.

⁸ Jonah 1:4.

⁹ Matthew 14:24.

¹⁰ Mark 4:37.

Throughout the Scriptures, I see wind – violent or otherwise – as an agent of change. I see wind as a ***disruptive*** force. I see wind as a tool that God uses to help cast aside the old and usher in the new. Going back to the previous examples, for instance, what did the wind disrupt? What changes did it usher in?

In Genesis, it was the force that calmed the waters that had wiped away all sinful life on earth. In Exodus, it ushered in one of the plagues that tested pharaoh's resolve and challenged his willingness to continue keeping the Hebrew people in bondage. For Jonah, the wind ushered in a series of events that, despite his desire to flee far from his obligation to God, ultimately put him on the road to Nineveh.

In Matthew, the wind brought about a storm, the result of which gifted the disciples with a glimpse of the true glory of Jesus as he walked along the sea. In Mark, wind and waves that frightened the disciples and made them worry their boat would sink were silenced by just three words uttered by Jesus: "Peace! Be still!"¹¹ And now, in this moment of Pentecost, the sound and wind heralded the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Once again, boundaries were challenged ... the new normal that was the post-ascension life of the disciples was disrupted ... the world was changed.

Here in the Shenandoah Valley, we are used to the changes the wind heralds. During the summer months, an uptick in the wind could mean a storm is imminent – a change in the temperature or humidity. In autumn time, the wind leads to the falling of the leaves – changes to the look of the landscape around us. And the winter winds mean the cold is upon us – changes in the amount of time we spend outdoors or how we choose to use our time indoors.

But here in our part of the world, we too have an opportunity to make a sound like the wind – the chance to herald changes that we will help bring about. Perhaps it is a change in our outreach opportunities ... or in the way we care for one another in this community ... or how we extend ourselves to those around us. God may call us to be like the Exodus wind, helping those for whom the circumstances of their lives may keep them in bondage. As the wind was for Jonah, perhaps we will be the motivation for someone to turn to God rather than fleeing from God's call ... putting them on their own road to Nineveh. On this day of Pentecost ... and ***each*** day ... we may be the wind used to herald the arrival of something wonderful in the lives of others and in the world around us.

When you hear a sound like the wind ... mighty, or impetuous, or yes, even violent ... do not be afraid. Instead, rejoice ... ***for the Holy Spirit is at hand***. And the world ... ***our*** world ... will never be the same.

Amen.

¹¹ Mark 4:39.