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“Whoosh”

Ezekiel 37:1-3, 9

New International Version

The hand of the LORD was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "Sovereign LORD, you alone know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'

Acts 2:1-4, 16-17

New Revised Standard Version

"When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. [For] this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.'

How many of you have been to Honolulu? A few years ago, there was a simulation done of what would happen¹ if a Category 4 hurricane were to hit the island of Oahu. The simulation's conclusion was that there would be over \$25 billion in damage and that upwards of one-hundred people might be killed. And it is actually a testimony to the sheer power of wind because most of that damage would actually be the result of the wind. When Katrina hit New Orleans, it was not just the torrential rains that were the problem but the fact that the **winds** drove the water in the marshlands towards New Orleans, sometimes piling them up to a depth of 20 feet. Of course, we don't need to go so far afield to know the immense power of wind. We still look with horror at those pictures from Joplin or from Tuscaloosa or too many other places across the south these past few months. Wind can be incredibly destructive. But wind can also, almost

¹<http://the.honoluluadvertiser.com/article/2007/May/22/In/FP705220345.html>

paradoxically, be very creative. For it was in fact several such Category 4 hurricanes that scientists say actually brought life to the Hawaiian islands hundreds of thousands of years ago. When the volcanoes beneath the ocean floor finally formed each of the Hawaiian islands, there was no life on them. But eons ago a few monster storms over the course of millennia sucked up a few unsuspecting and no-doubt very confused birds and flung them 2500 miles to deposit them on those islands. It was the same with vegetation; seeds carried by the winds or in the bellies of those birds found were blown to the islands and began to turn a chain of barren rocks into the lush and beautiful places.

In every culture and land, wind has been recognized for its power. In the ancient Hebrew culture, the word for wind and the word for spirit and the word for breath are the very same word: **ruach**. Children, particularly, love saying the word because it sounds as if you are making a sound you're not supposed to: **ruach**. In the account of Genesis of the creation of the world, it is said that the Spirit of God – God's **ruach**, God's very breath – was brooding and blowing over the waters. Some translations say "breath" or "spirit," and some, like the New Revised Standard version says wind: "a wind from God swept over the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:2). Or, do you remember the story of the prophet Ezekiel in the valley of the dry bones and his vision there? Here is what he said: *"Then [God] said ...: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live. I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived...."* Breath and wind: it is the very same word, **ruach**. The breath of God and the wind from God and the Spirit of God are all the same concept, the same word, and by this we can see that for the Hebrew people it was God indeed that gave life through God's very breath.

Given the central place and the power of this word in the Hebrew scripture, it is no wonder that band of Jews led by Peter who gathered for the Jewish Festival of Pentecost

would choose to try to describe what happened to them there with this powerful word, this powerful metaphor, of ruach! Did you hear it? The text says what they experienced was *like* the rush of a mighty wind, a mighty breath of God, a mighty ruach. *Like* a mighty wind and *like* tongues of fire – the writer is attempting to describe something that happened there that day that was beyond words. But what he and those gathered there *could* say un-metaphorically is that they were **transformed** in that place and by their experience. They became new people. Their future had been given a completely new shape and scope. And given such a transformation, such renewal, such change, it is no wonder that the writer used the metaphor of ruach– spirit, breath, wind – that was so much a part of the heritage of God’s chosen people. God’s ruach had transformed before – in creation itself, in that valley of bones, at Sinai where the winds blew as the Law and Teachings were delivered to Moses – and it had apparently transformed again. The wind of God had blown through their lives and nothing would ever be the same.

Not only is the wind a metaphor that would have been known and appreciated by those Jews in that upper room on that day of Pentecost, when we think about how wind works we can appreciate even more why it was indeed the metaphor chosen and why indeed God’s very breath is identified with the wind. Because wind does two things – wind sometimes blows us together, it sometimes blows us apart.

Take the first trait: **wind blows us together**. Have any of you seen the movie “*March of the Penguins*”? It is an amazing movie. It doesn’t sound like it would be, but it is. It is the story of a year in the life of the penguins who live in Antarctica, the most brutal climate on earth. Part of the film shows how, at the beginning of the long, dark winter, all of the female penguins each lays one egg, and then, exhausted, start a long trek to the ocean to find food that they badly need after the rigors of gestation and birth. But before they do, each female penguin hands her precious egg off to its father in a

ridiculous and yet wonderful dance and then the father carefully tucks the egg under himself and sits on it the whole winter. But it's horrendously cold; Antarctica has the lowest record temperature on earth, 129 degrees below zero², and with the unceasing winter winds the wind chill is closer to 200 below zero. How do these penguins survive, how do the precious and fragile eggs survive, these months of brutal cold and wind?

Well, in the face of that wind, thousands and thousands of penguins clump together, sharing their bodies' warmth. And the most astounding thing about this is that through some non-linguistic, deep-seated instinct for both survival and what we might call altruism, those penguins slowly over the hours circulate within that clump of thousands of penguins so that those on the outside of the circle don't stay there always – else they'd die – and those on the inside of the clump slowly make their way to the edge so that the exhausted and nearly frozen ones who had been on the outside can now warm up. It's an amazing thing to watch on the film, as those thousands of male penguins slowly shuffle back-and-forth, inside-to-outside-to-inside-to-outside, carefully protecting the egg nestled in a pouch between their feet.

Sometimes, indeed, the wind blows us **together**. Peter and those who had followed Jesus felt that wind, that Spirit, blowing them together, helping them to hold on to one another, to up-build one another, to grieve and worry and wonder with one another, in those long weeks after Jesus' earthly death. He had told them to wait, but wait for what? What would happen? How long would it take? Can God really be trusted? Can we really believe? But the wind, the Spirit, blew them together. They held on to one another during those confused days after Jesus' earthly life, and they helped each other move forward. Like the penguins, they clumped together for mutual strength, in response to the winds that blew them together. Has it happened to you? Have *you*

²<http://hypertextbook.com/facts/2000/YongLiLiang.shtml>

experienced the transforming and upholding and up-building power of God's spirit when the winds of life blew you together with some folks who could, thankfully, hold you up? Have you had those times in *your* life when folks clustered around you, when you needed time in the center of the circle to counter the effects of the cold winds of life that might have been abrading you? It is in the times when a relationship goes bad, or a child is hurting, or an illness threatens, or so many other things that the wind, the spirit, seeks indeed to blow us together with folks who can help, who can offer an arm, or a hand, or a shoulder, or a wise word. Is one of those times **now** for you? Then I hope you'll lift up a hand to catch the breeze, make it known that you need some of that Spirit. And God will not forsake you, and God's Spirit, God's ruach, will indeed seek to blow you together with those who can convey God's gentle grace and tender mercies.

But sometimes, the **wind blows us apart**. And sometimes it **needs** to. One of the things I used to recall doing in Indiana about this time of year when our children were small was to go into the yard and lie down with them in the newly green grass. But in addition to the grass, the lawn was usually awash with dandelions that had begun to go to seed. Now, when they are in their prime, dandelions are small and multi-petaled yellow flowers that gardeners hate because they spring up everywhere you don't want them. But when they were past their prime, now white instead of yellow, one of the children and I would lie down in the grass, finding a spot where my mowing had missed a few, and we would pick some and then blow – as hard as we could – and watch as a zillion little white fluffy, cottony seeds blew their way onto the breeze and would go sometimes hundreds of feet before alighting. Of course, this didn't make future lawn care any easier, but there was just something almost miraculous about watching how those puffy clouds of dandelion seeds could become so beautiful in the breeze

The wind, the spirit, the ruach, the breath of God that blew through that room

where the disciples gathered on Pentecost ended up scattering them like a cloud of dandelion seeds. It blew them apart. And that was a good and wonderful thing. For it meant that the gospel was spread; it meant that like wind-driven dandelion seeds, the gospel was able to take root in places that did not yet know it. For think about it: it would have been so, so easy, so, so tempting, for the disciples to stay there in that place, stay there in Jerusalem, warmed and blown together by that Pentecost experience and simply enjoy one another and their own relationship with God. And if they had done so, you and I likely wouldn't be here this morning, and, most likely, the church itself might have died in the Roman attacks on Jerusalem before the turn of that first century. Just look at what tradition tells us happened to some of those first disciples, to some of those who had gathered in Jerusalem and who the Spirit, the wind, the **ruach** of God blew upon: Matthew went to Ethiopia to preach; Andrew went to western Asia; Mark found himself in Egypt; Bartholomew and Thomas took the Gospel to India (where you can still find churches that trace their lineage to those two).³ It would have been so much easier to have stayed in Jerusalem, basking in God's love, enjoying the comforting warm breezes of fellowship. But God's spirit, God's **ruach**, expressed through that wind on that day, had other ideas.

And God's spirit, God's breath, God's **ruach**, has other ideas for us. The wind that is from God is not simply one that binds us together, but it is one that sends us forth in mission. Preacher William Willimon's words are right-on here: *"Just when we get all settled down, comfortable with present arrangements, our pews bolted securely to the floor, all fixed and immobile, there comes a rush of wind... a breath of fresh air, tongues of fire and.....the Holy Spirit prevails!"*⁴ For while God indeed through the Spirit is our

³<http://ezinearticles.com/?Whatever-Happened-to-the-Apostles-in-the-Bible?&id=304747>

⁴<http://www.chapel.duke.edu/worship/sunday/viewsermon.aspx?id=44>

Comforter, God always has in mind for our lives and for our church more than *just* comfortableness.

So as we take this one final look at the Pentecost story, I want each of you to ask yourselves: is there any way in which *you* are feeling **too** comfortable with you life or your routine? Do you wonder if there is something more that God has in mind for you? Do you have any sense of a purpose that might be going un-fulfilled? If so, stick your hand out and catch that wind, that spirit, that **ruach** of God for it will indeed try to blow you in new directions, give you new life, transform you and renew you.

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.” Having been protected and comforted and bonded together by the winds of God’s own spirit, now the rush of that Spirit will send them forth, in new ways, to do new things, to have new lives. Whoosh! May it be the same for us!