

“Wind Power” / Acts 2:1-21 / 27 May 2012

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place...” What? All of them still stuck there in that same old place? Still stranded in that same Upper Room where they’ve been since Maundy Thursday? Well, it’s true. Sometimes we get stuck, and the Spirit has to swoop in and do something crazy to drive us out into the world where we belong. Sometimes it takes a very strong wind to blow us out of the places where we get stuck.

On our way to solar school for the Haiti Water Project last week, Rich Salvante, Karl Casey, and I discussed the steep learning curve ahead of us. Our water purification project in Haiti has to be powered by solar energy, since you can’t just plug into West Penn Power down in those parts. And so, someone from Bower Hill had to learn how to set up a solar energy system. Now, none of us really has a background in photovoltaics or even basic wiring—though both Rich and Karl knew much more about it than I did. I wasn’t supposed to be on the team at all, but when Rick Jacobs had to go to Texas for a family emergency, someone swooped in—perhaps on behalf of the Spirit—someone swooped in and convinced me to take Rick’s place. As the three of us boarded the plane, the flight attendant told us to turn off all cellular devices. Karl and I watched with sad amazement as Rich fumbled with his iPhone, unable to find the off switch. The scene was not encouraging. Karl had to show him how to turn the thing off, and in that comic moment, we felt a little tinge of despair. I pointed out that this is the crew of technicians that’s going to install solar electric panels in the Haitian bush.

Once we arrived in Arkansas, our anxiety levels rose a bit. There on display in full sun we saw the boxes full of chords and cables, and the panels, and the wire mazes that we would be constructing with our own soft hands. Karl said, “It sounds like the beginning of a joke: A musician, a hair stylist, and a minister walked into solar school. But nobody knows the punch line yet.” I warned my two teammates that what happens in Arkansas does not stay in Arkansas; it finds its way eventually to the Bower Hill pulpit.

Solar class began with the standard introductions, and when I stood to introduce myself, in that room full of Southerners, I said, “The three of us are from Bower Hill Church, Pittsburgh. You can call us ‘The Three Rivers’. I’m the Allegheny.” [Of course, I didn’t explain it to my classmates, but it only made sense that I should be the Allegheny. I mean, it is true that the Allegheny River is shallow and fast—and I am neither of those things. But like the Allegheny, I do come to Pittsburgh from the Northwoods of Pennsylvania. And my hometown is on the banks of that river. It made sense, too, for Karl to be the Monongahela, since just like that river, he’s deep and still. He’s also originally from West Mifflin, over in the Mon Valley. And, well, it made sense for Rich to be the Ohio River, either because he is the mightiest and the largest, or else because that was the only river left.] And so, with great good humor, we undertook a task that felt infinitely beyond us.

And I think we did all right. The instructors started talking about volts, and watt-hours, and amps, and AC vs. DC. I felt overwhelmed by the jargon alone, and the names of all the strange tools. But Rich reminded me, “This stuff isn’t hard. It’s just foreign.” And he was right, and his even-tempered, philosophical approach had a calming effect. Now, I had to hurry back to Pittsburgh so that I could be here in the pulpit last Sunday. I was back home by 1am on Sunday morning, and during worship that day, for the first time in my career, in my sleep-deprived state, I forgot the words to the Lord’s Prayer, just as we were getting to the part about debts and debtors. I did miss out on solar school graduation that same day, though I didn’t miss any actual class time. Karl told me that he brought my diploma home with him. I am a graduate technician of PV systems. Sometimes the Spirit swoops.

Now, I'd like to stand up here and tell you that I'm ready to go to Haiti and attach a pair of solar panels to a water pump. But I'll admit that I don't feel ready. Like many a person who holds even a real diploma, I know very well that I haven't mastered the subject. But I do believe that between the three of us (rivers), and in the six months that we have to prepare ourselves before our trip to Haiti, and with the raw elements that we were able to absorb in a short time, we're probably going to be able to swing it. I never saw myself working with wires, and voltage, and—well—tools. But that's changing rapidly...between owning a 150-year old house and now this Haiti thing. The Spirit has swooped in and done a new thing. A new wind is blowing hard, blowing me—and perhaps my two teammates, perhaps Bower Hill Church, perhaps everyone in this room—out of old self-conceptions where we may have been stuck. It's blowing us forward into new ventures that we never would have expected.

I think that education is as much a matter of learning how much you don't know, and where to find answers, as it is a matter of possessing knowledge. And if you've spent enough years beneath the sun, then you're aware that knowledge is like power, and inspiration, and maturity; it doesn't come to us all at once. We don't get all the answers we need by spending one long weekend in Arkansas, just as we don't walk through life with all the gifts of strength and creativity and understanding that we'll need for our span of years. No, we usually get just as much as we need for the day ahead of us. The needful things come in tiny little portions, just enough for the day on hand. And it's rare—rare and precious—to have it all together at one time, in one place.

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.” And let me tell you, being all together in one place must have been getting a little old. Think about it. They've been in that same Upper Room since Maundy Thursday! What if all of us had been sitting together in this room since the Thursday before Easter? And the memories that place holds for them! And here they still are in that same dark, hot room, a long, narrow room with mud walls and a low ceiling. It's not a fancy place. A single window is shuttered tight against the world outside, a world that scares them now. A few rays of harsh Middle Eastern sunlight filter through cracks between the boards, casting oblong shafts of light on the same familiar faces, the creases, the wrinkles, the reddish tan skin of sunburned fishermen. They've been staring across that same old table at the same old faces ever since the night of Jesus' arrest. Yes, a lot had happened since that dreadful night. The horrors of crucifixion, the joys of resurrection, but here they still were, hiding out from a world where good people get crucified. They'd had joy-filled visions of the resurrected Jesus, but they were still scared to show their faces in the streets. They were scared of a world that kills its own best visionaries. They'd learned that, in a world like this, you have to hide. And so they hid. They were stuck in a rut, stuck in a room, stuck with the same old crowd, paralyzed. And into that place of paralysis, a new wind blew, and this old world has never been the same. Sometimes Easter isn't enough. Sometimes the Spirit has to swoop down on us and drive us out of the ruts where we get stuck.

And so, stop to consider: If the Spirit herself were to alight on us today, like she did at Pentecost (and if I call the Spirit “her” it's because the Aramaic language of Jesus also calls the Spirit “her”), if she were to swoop, as she did in ancient times, if a holy wind were to blow open these doors, what would she change? What are the ruts, the helpless, hopeless old patterns from which she would drive you? From what tired old themes would she have to free your thinking? From what fears, from what empty longings, from what old hurts would she have to heal you, in order for you to move forward as an agent of reconciliation in a broken world?

Sister Mary Madeleine showed up at the convent, and the Mother Superior told her, “We take our vows of silence very seriously here; you may only speak when I direct you to do so.” Three years passed in total silence, until at last the Mother Superior told Sister Mary Madeleine, “You may speak two words.” The nun said, “Hard bed.” Mother Superior replied, “I’m sorry to hear that, sister; we’ll put some extra straw in your mattress.” Three more years of silence passed, and Mother Superior said again, “You may speak two words.” The nun replied, “Bad food.” Again Mother Superior said, “I’m sorry to hear that, sister; we’ll give you an extra teaspoon of molasses to sweeten your oatmeal.” Again three years passed, and again Mary Madeleine was asked to speak. This time she said, “I quit.” Not surprised, Mother Superior said, “It’s probably best, sister. You’ve been complaining for years.”

Oh, how we get stuck! And, like poor Mary Madeleine, “the complainer,” we get stuck in the identities that others assign to us. We also get stuck in the identities that assign to ourselves. We get stuck in the sweet, lovely places where our best living occurred. And—like those helpless disciples still waiting in their stale Upper Room—we get stuck in our worst places, our most painful, most humiliating places, the places where we’ve been most profoundly marked and wounded. Where are you stuck? In your glory days? In your childhood? In a relationship—or behaviors and modes of thought that were formed by a relationship that is no more? In a time that you couldn’t even begin to explain? An old U2 song says it well: “You’ve got yourself stuck in a moment, and you can’t get out of it.” A moment of glory, a moment of abuse, a moment of tragedy, a moment of unspeakable loss? They mark us forever, but they all have exits that we would do well to discover.

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place...” It’s nice to have things all together in one place. But in truth, people will only change when the pain of remaining the same *exceeds* the pain of changing—like the pain of remaining in that room forever exceeded the pain of going out into the world as martyrs. Is a Spirit Wind ushering new things into your life today? Sometimes, as my Arkansas experience proved, it takes “three rivers” to change a light bulb. Sometimes we just need to make the determination to change. Sometimes we can only change if we open ourselves to another person. Sometimes we have to finally make that hard step that we’ve been putting off for so, so long.

In what Upper Room have you been stuck for far too long? The Spirit beckons you back out into the world! It is from this world that you are born, for this world that you are created, and you will only be satisfied when you are plugged in to some work that—in some small way—benefits this big world. There are some ruts that we can escape on our own. But if the rut that you’re in now seems inescapable, then know that there are other ruts that are bigger than us, and it takes more than one person alone to escape them. It takes investment in a community. It takes living for good things that don’t do *you* a bit of good. It means letting go of old, old ideas that hold us hostage, to the detriment of the world. It means letting the wind upset the applecart. And so, this morning of Pentecost, where are you stuck? Where must the Spirit Wind blow you free? Amen.