

Pneumatic power

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on Whitsunday, the Day of Pentecost, May 31, 2009.

Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience Romans 8:24

The first Pentecost brought together a very frightened and scattered community of Christians. Bound together by their common experience in Christ, they were commissioned and empowered by God's Holy Spirit to be the church. From that moment on, the course of history was changed dramatically.

Pentecost is the third of the great festivals of the church year after Christmas and Easter, marking the close of the fifty days of Easter. Pentecost was taken from the Jewish festival of the Feast of Weeks held seven weeks after Passover to commemorate the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai. It is the foundation of the Jewish faith in the same way that Pentecost marks the foundation of our Christian faith. Today is also known as Whitsunday because of the white garments worn by those who were baptized to celebrate the brightness of the faith into which they were born.

It was on this day of Pentecost that the disciples were empowered through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to act in God's name. To be inspired is to breathe in, in this case, to breathe in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit, like the wind and breath gives life, energy and power. The Greek for breath is *pneuma*, from which we get the words pneumatic and pneumonia, both of which have to do with air and breathing. The Hebrew for wind is *ruach*, referring to an invisible but powerful movement of air we can't see, only its effects. Whether we are on a sailing vessel or standing on a beach, there is nothing like the bracing effects of a strong breeze. One of the valuable resources of energy being rediscovered is wind power with modern wind mills appearing on the landscape in numerous places.

Another image of the Spirit is fire, a basic source of energy and power which is why the altar and vestments are arrayed in red today. The fire of the Holy Spirit generates immeasurable power that cannot be contained, giving energy to the ongoing process of creation, redemption and guidance.

We all have a basic need for power and control over our lives. Power can be used to do great good or it can be easily corrupted. We get into trouble when we try to claim power we do not have or misuse the power we do have.

We have all known those who try to dominate others by contradicting what they say or do. No matter what the subject, whether in keeping a home, preparing a meal, repairing an appliance, eating a healthy diet or making a point in history, they will contradict or dispute what you say because they always have to be right. If you say something complimentary about someone, they will respond with a critical and uncomplimentary remark. Self-important people who contradict on a regular basis are tiresome in their effort to dominate and invalidate others. In dealing with self important people, it is important to remember that no one can downgrade you or mess with your mind unless you give them permission.

There is a story about self-important people on a small plane with their pilot and three passengers: a corporate executive, an elderly priest and a boy scout. The pilot comes back to tell them that the plane is disabled and is going down and there are only three parachutes. He grabs one of

them and jumps out, leaving two parachutes for the three who remain. After an awkward pause, the corporate executive grabs a parachute because he believes that he is important to his company and to the economy, leaving the priest and the scout with just one parachute between the two of them. The elderly priest explains that he has lived a good long life and is ready to go and hands the scout the last parachute. At which point the scout tells him, "No problem, Father, that guy just grabbed my knapsack."

Too often we grab our cultural knapsacks and jump out the door without thinking about what's in them. We carry around too much useless baggage that is not only irrelevant but burdensome.

The same Spirit who came over the disciples on that first Pentecost empowered them to go forth as servants of Christ to proclaim the good news of the gospel to the world. This is the power and energy that brings out the best in us and destroys the ignorance and fear that leads to the denigration of those who are different. This is the power that leads us to work for justice and peace and to respect the dignity of every human being.

The most basic elements of fire, wind and water are all symbolic of our faith. The energy in the fire and wind of Pentecost and in the cleansing effect of the water of baptism are the basis of the Christian faith. As the sailor relies on the direction of the wind to power the boat, so we are guided by the pneumatic power of Pentecost to move us in the right direction to create a community that will not sacrifice justice on the altar of economics. As inheritors of the gifts of teaching, healing, leading and giving, it is the Holy Spirit who guides us in the right use of our gifts for God's service.

It is never too late to discern how our gifts and talents can be used for God's service. When God gives us a task we don't want, it may just be what we need to do. It is like the new recruit who tells the drill sergeant to give him any assignment except latrine duty who is then assigned to latrine duty. It is not so much what we think we want or don't want, but what God needs.

The giving of the gifts and power of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost gave the apostles their hope for the church. Our hope is not in what we know will succeed, but in doing what is right and good with no assurance that it will succeed. Hope is not the same as optimism, nor even the expectation that everything will be all right. Our hope is in fulfilling what God requires of us, regardless of how it turns out, simply because it is right and good and true.

Come, Holy Spirit, creator, and renew the face of the earth.

Come, Holy Spirit, breath of God, and make us a living people, holy and free.

Come, Holy Spirit, wisdom and truth: strengthen us in the risk of faith.