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Embracing the Wind

Acts 2:2

I recently saw a 1934 film called *The Cat's Paw* starring Harold Lloyd and Una Merkel. It tells the story of Ezekiel Cobb, a young man who returns to America for the first time after being raised by missionary parents in China. His mission is to find an American wife to take back to China with him so that he can continue his father's missionary activities. Ezekiel faces many challenges in America. He has great difficulty communicating with most people because he doesn't know the slang of the 1930s. The people he meets find him to be very strange when he bows to them and speaks with a highly developed sense of oriental courtesy. All of this is played to great comic effect. Perhaps the greatest problem Ezekiel faces is the fact that he trusts everybody and this keeps getting him into trouble. But his greatest asset is his friendship with Chinese Americans. He keeps meeting friends of friends of the people his father serves in China. He speaks their language and they embrace him as a friend.

Ezekiel's search for a wife is interrupted by an improbable series of events that result in his being elected mayor of a hopelessly corrupt city. Ezekiel has a "handler" named Jake Mayo who is a savvy political operator. He assures Ezekiel that all he has to do is follow his directions and everything will be fine. Jake soon discovers that Ezekiel Cobb cannot be controlled. The moment of truth comes when Jake finds the young man vetoing the standard waste removal contract with the local mob boss. When he tells Ezekiel that he is signing his own death warrant the young man is oblivious to the warning. Ezekiel is not motivated by fear or self protection. For him integrity is not a decision to be weighed, it is at the heart of who he is.

In the end Ezekiel prevails over the mobsters and crooked politicians with the help of his Chinese friends and his clever use of political strategies from Chinese history. The film plays to all the anti-Chinese racial stereotypes that were so typical in the 1930s but in the end turns them upside down. Ezekiel Cobb's integrity and commitment to serving others becomes a powerful wind which shakes the foundations of the city and points the way to a different kind of future.

A similar process is unfolding in the second chapter of the Book of Acts. There we read of a community of people who are learning to set aside their fear and their need for self protection. We know that something profound is at work in this community because the men and women were all together in the same place. By gathering together in the upper room these followers of Christ were already breaking through the rigid rules and expectations of their society. The resurrection of Christ was already at work giving them the courage to imagine a different kind of future.

The people gathered that day were very familiar with a prophet by the name of Ezekiel who ministered during the time of Israel's captivity in Babylon. They knew the story about the Spirit driving Ezekiel out of the city to a valley where there were countless dry bones. This was the carnage of war which symbolized the defeat and suffering of Ezekiel's people during their time in exile. And in that place Ezekiel has a vision of the wind of God coming to bring life to a people who have been left for dead. Ezekiel is called by God to give witness to this new hope for the future. He is to be a carrier of the wind that will change the future.

It is that wind which comes to the people gathered in the upper room. It is a wind which challenges people who have lost the capacity to create and enjoy real community. It penetrates the hearts of those who know all too well that they are separated by race, culture, and language. When the wind of the Spirit blows on the gathering in Jerusalem all the barriers to communication are broken down. The disciples move down into the streets. They are speaking their own language and to their astonishment people who are gathered there from all over the world can hear and discern what they say.

As the followers of Jesus leave the upper room and mix with the multi-cultural gathering in the streets, they discover that they have become carriers of the wind. The people who witness this event are confronted with a basic choice. Will they embrace the wind or will they try to resist it? Will they be assimilated into this new kind of community or will they choose to remain in their graves of alienation and racial prejudice. We see in this passage the response of those who are determined to resist the wind. They are the ones who look at what is happening and sneer, “They are filled with new wine (Acts 2:13)!”

This week we mark the beginning of Westminster’s 175th year of ministry. This church came into being because of a young man who had learned to embrace the wind. Albert Hale came to Illinois as a missionary in 1831. In the Spring of 1834 he visited Springfield, but did not plan to stay. Since the Illinois River was too high to cross he accepted an invitation to hold a series of revival meetings at the Presbyterian Church. Among the people who attended those meetings a group came together and decided to organize a second Presbyterian church in Springfield.¹ This church would be founded on the principle that slavery must be abolished. They invited Hale to be the first pastor but he decided to continue his missionary travels for few more years. Then in 1839 Hale accepted the call to serve the congregation he helped to create and stayed 27 years.²

One of the interesting things about Albert Hale is that he was part of a movement of students at Yale who believed they were called to a new state in the West to help shape a different kind of future. At the heart of their call was the understanding that the question of slavery hung in the balance for this new state. Some have called them the “Illinois Movement” and others have referred to them as the “Yale Band.” In 1829 twelve students signed a compact which included these words:

Believing in the entire alienation of the natural heart from God, in the necessity of the influences of the Holy Spirit for its renovation, and...deeply impressed with the destitute condition of the Western section of our country...and in view of the fearful crisis evidently approaching...and believing that evangelical religion and education must go hand in hand...we the undersigned hereby express our readiness to go to the state of Illinois for the purpose of establishing a seminary of learning...and to occupy as preachers important stations in the surrounding country...provided the providence of God permits us...³

They began by raising \$10,000 in the East to fund the establishment of Illinois College. Then they began moving West. Two had teaching careers at Illinois College. The other ten served across the state of Illinois as missionaries, pastors, and teachers. They were wind carriers who moved from one place to another organizing churches and founding schools. They all understood what Pentecost is about. They knew that the old structures of slavery and racism could not stand in the new community created by the Spirit. That wind is still blowing in our midst.

Endnotes

1. The importance of the 1834 revival in the formation of Second Presbyterian Church is emphasized by D. S. Johnson in his 50th Anniversary Sermon in 1885. He had access to surviving charter members and to Albert Hale who was still living in 1885.
2. The invitation to Albert Hale to be the first pastor is reported by Clinton Conkling in his 1910 summary of Westminster's history. Conkling's source was Albert Hale, Jr. who wrote a summary of his father's life and career which his sister, Sophie Hale, sent to Conkling in November of 1906. That summary includes this description of Albert Hale's role in the founding of Second Presbyterian:

He had been consulted freely by many individuals on the subject of the organizing of that church in '35, and when it had been organized he was the first man invited to become its pastor. However, he did not then accept.
3. Carrie Prudence Kofoid, "Puritan Influences in the Formative Years of Illinois History," *Illinois State Historical Society*, 1905, pages 278-286. The phrase "in view of the fearful crisis evidently approaching" is the kind of language abolitionists were using to describe the national struggle over slavery.