

Sermon – “Harnessing the Spirit”
Pentecost Sunday, June 9, 2019
Scripture Reading: Acts 2:1-6, 12-18
Blythe Denham Kieffer, D. Min.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

Our scripture reading is Acts 2:1-6, 12-18. This is Luke’s account of what took place at the Pentecost festival fifty days following the Passover, which marked the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Those gathered hear the words of the disciples in their own dialect and experience God’s presence in a life changing way. Hear now the word of God.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² 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. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. ⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. (pause)

Members of the congregation speak vs. 17-18 in the languages of German (Bob Blythe), Korean (Sophia Choi), Spanish (Beth Allen), and French (Carolyn Lowe).

Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³ But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.” ¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

*¹⁷ ‘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.*

*¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy. Amen*

The title of the sermon: “Harnessing the Spirit”

The text: God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.... Acts 2:17a

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, we gather on this Pentecost Sunday to celebrate and to seek inspiration and ingenuity in our ability to harness your Spirit for the good of the world. As we reflect together, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

This week Peter and I watched a movie on Netflix entitled *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*. Based on the memoir of William Kamkwamba, this story about a young boy's ingenuity and determination to overcome adversity is truly inspiring.

William Kamkwamba was born in 1987 into a Christian family in Malawia country where magic ruled and modern science was a mystery. It was also a land withered by drought and hunger. Enchanted by the workings of electricity as a boy, William had a goal to study science in Malawi's top boarding schools. However, in 2002, his country was stricken with a famine that left his family's farm devastated and his parents destitute. Unable to pay the eighty-dollar-a-year tuition for his education, William was forced to drop out and help his family forage for food as thousands across the country starved and died.

In an attempt to continue to engage his curiosity and determination, William frequented the village library. Here he read about windmills in a book called *Using Energy*. With nothing more than a fistful of cornmeal in his stomach, a small pile of once-forgotten science textbooks, the local junk yard, and an armory of curiosity and determination, William embarked on a daring plan to bring electricity and water to his village.

Using scrap metal, tractor parts, and bicycle halves, William forged a crude yet operable windmill generator, an unlikely contraption and small miracle that eventually powered small lights at his home and charged a neighbor's cell phone. A second machine turned a water pump that could battle the drought and famine that loomed with every season.

Soon, news of William's "electric wind" spread beyond the borders of his home, and he became the local hero who harnessed the wind. In 2007 venture capitalists heard his story at a conference in Tanzania and pledged to finance his secondary education. In 2014, William received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Environmental Studies from Dartmouth College where he was elected to the Sphinx Senior Honor Society.

The saga of how William's ingenuity, resourcefulness, and fortitude came to meet the challenges of poverty and famine through sustainable resources and renewable energy has become an inspiration throughout the world. Not only can a bright and young mind feed and empower his family, but also he can find a way to do so with respect for God's creation.

The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind creates an allegory for the renewed strength we receive from the Holy Spirit which again and again greets us like a refreshing breeze, filling the sails that move us and cleansing the air that we breath. God's presence and love can be a powerful resource and advocate when they are transformed in creative and constructive ways within the faith community.

On this Pentecost (weekend) Sunday we remember the extraordinary experience of those who gathered in Jerusalem for a Jewish festival, fifty days following Easter morning and ten days after Christ's departure and ascension. We celebrate how God's loving spirit lived and moved among them, in a new way, like a mighty wind, empowering them through words that were not their own and an understanding that transcended language and culture. The creative and constructive spirit spoke of unity and inclusivity among God's children in a new way. The Pentecost Spirit brings a sustainable resource empowering people of faith amidst the unpredictable and unfair famine and floods of life not unlike the boy harnessing the wind and bringing forth water to nourish his farmland and village.

As followers of Christ, we are also called to speak the universal language which transcends culture and nationality, filling the basic needs of clean water, nutritious food, sturdy shelter and sustainable energy as well as advocating for the freedom to love with hospitality, security, laughter and art.

This past Thursday the world commemorated the 75th anniversary of D-day. On June 6, 1944, our country joined several nations transcending language and culture to fight the repressive evil of Nazi Germany. More than 160,000 Allied troops landed along a 50-mile stretch of heavily-fortified coastline on the beaches of Normandy, France. 5,000 Ships and 13,000 aircraft supported the D-Day invasion, and by day's end, the Allies gained a foot-hold in continental Europe. The cost in lives was high. More than 9,000 Allied Soldiers were killed or wounded, but their sacrifice allowed more than 100,000 soldiers to begin the slow, hard slog across Europe so that fascism might succumb to freedom.

May we be people who are freely empowered by God's spirit, which surrounds us like the murmur of the dove's song and the rush of the wind. May we creatively and constructively harness God's spirit as we advocate for others and move beyond the barriers of language and culture. May we never stop being in awe of the Holy Trinity, whose name is too holy to speak, who lived among us and died for us, and whose being is beyond our understanding yet whose presence is within our reach. Amen.