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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

May 23, 2021

Day of Pentecost, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary

[Ezekiel 37:1-14](#)

[Psalm 104:25-35, 37](#)

[Acts 2:1-21](#)

[John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15](#)

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“You send forth your Spirit, and all things are created; and so you renew the face of the earth.”

I’ve been thinking about the word “renew.” It’s kind of a paradox in a single word, because of that little prefix, *re*. It means new and old at the same time. Making something new—*again*. But if it’s again, then how is it new? Renewing something doesn’t mean turning back the clock to make it exactly what it used to be.

Otherwise it wouldn’t be new. But it also doesn’t mean wiping what used to be off the map and starting over. Otherwise it wouldn’t be “*re*”-newed, it’d just be brand new.

There was a time when the world was brand new. “In the beginning,” Genesis says, the world was without form and empty, and “a wind from God” swept over the waters—or maybe “the Spirit of God,” because in both languages of the Bible, Hebrew and Greek, the exact same word means either “wind” or “Spirit.” Which can make for some tricky choices for translators. Imagine if all the references to the Holy Spirit in the whole Bible were replaced with “Holy Wind.” I wonder if it would give us a fiercer, wilder understanding of God. Well, that fierce, wild spirit-wind was there at the beginning when all things were truly brand new. But ever since then that Spirit has been about *re*-newal, taking what had grown old and making it new again, taking what had died and making it live.

Ezekiel had a vision of the Spirit, the Wind of God, rushing from the four corners of the earth to blow breath into the dead and make them live again. Ezekiel lived in a time of exile. God’s people had been conquered by Babylon and dragged off to a foreign land. The whole history of Israel, the Temple, the sacrifices, the prayers, lived only in their hearts and minds. Most of it hadn’t been written down yet, because why would it have needed to be, until it wasn’t there anymore? Ezekiel saw what God was about to do: to gather the people back from exile, to bring them safely into their land again, with a new rebuilt Temple. A restoration. But also, a renewal. In Babylon God’s people had started to write their ancient stories down: the creation story, the Exodus, God appearing to Moses in a fire that blazed in a bush without destroying it, the escape from Egypt, the liberation of the enslaved, the giving of the Law, the birth of a holy people. Torah was born; scripture was born, a way of sustaining the faith in exile. And when God brought them back, they brought the writings back with them, and Israel became a people of Torah, a people of the Book. Something new.

The friends of Jesus had followed him around as he healed the sick, forgave sinners, told stories of God's realm, and brought the scriptures to life in ways they'd never heard before. Then he was arrested and executed. He was buried. Then God breathed life back into his body. They saw him again. They were overjoyed. But things didn't go back to what they'd been. He spoke of giving them power. He spoke of sending them out. He left them, yet told them he would be with them always. They didn't know what to do next. They kept praying in the Temple, kept meeting together, kept breaking bread. They gathered together on the fiftieth day after Passover, and then something new happened. The Spirit-wind showed up again and blew them out into the world to scatter the gospel like an explosion of dandelion seeds bursting out in all directions. They were still the people of God, yet in a new way. They held onto so much of what had already been: the scriptures, the prayers, the stories of everything God had done in the past. And yet so much was new. They baptized in the name of Jesus. They broke bread in his name. They wrote new scriptures, stories of what Jesus had done and was doing in their midst. They went out to all nations as the Spirit blew them over boundaries of race and class and language and gender. They became a new community, sharing what they had with each other, caring for those around them. It was a renewal. God sent forth the Spirit, and once again renewed the face of the earth.

Today is Pentecost. That Spirit-wind is still on the loose in God's world. No one has ever caught it or stopped it up. No one ever can. But where will it blow next?

You and I have been gathered together today after a long time apart. Gathered from the four winds, gathered from a strange and very different kind of exile. We are in a time of pandemic, a time of social upheaval, a time when structures and institutions we might have taken for granted are up for grabs, in the church as much as in our society. This is a time of new beginnings: a time of renewal. What will we carry with us? What new things will God show us?

We will carry with us the scriptures, of course, those of God's Hebrew people and those written by the friends of Jesus. We will carry with us our baptism and the breaking of bread. We'll carry our practices of hospitality to neighbor and care for the vulnerable and love for one another. The Spirit may help us let go of some things—the trappings of power and respectability, the church as an institution of conquest and empire. The Spirit may help us hang on to others—the church as a launching place of hospitals and abolition movements and a place of welcome for refugees and strangers.

I don't know what the Church will look like in five years, or fifty, or five hundred or five thousand. I know the Spirit-wind will be blowing just like she is now: a fire that blazes without destroying; a wind that brings new life to the dead.

May that wind breathe in us, in our own day, a day of Pentecost.