Something's Happening!
A Pentecost sermon preached at
Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church,
Edmonton, Alberta
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Text: John 3:8, 14:15-17, 25-27, Psalm 104:1-13

There is something unsettling about the wind. I remember as a kid the feeling I would get when I walked to school on a really windy day. Do you remember that feeling from when you were a kid? The sky filled with these clouds rushing, the trees waving wildly, the wind whipping your hair. It took a lot of work to even walk. It was as if you could hear the wind shouting, "Something's happening! Something's happening!"

No one ever instructed me that this is the way you should feel on windy days, I don't remember having a conversation with anyone about the wind. I wonder if it is some sort of primal response, our bodies are tuned to our environment, and the wind brings change.

The disciples were gathered together after Jesus had gone to heaven. They were praying and waiting for the gift that Jesus said he would give to them. This is all recorded in Acts chapter two…and "there came a sound like the rush of a mighty wind". If you heard a sound like the rush of a mighty wind, what sort of feeling would you get? "Something's happening! Something's happening!"

There are eight more references to the wind in the book of Acts. The wind is mentioned more in Acts than any other New Testament book. The apostle Paul travelled by ship for his missionary journeys, and over and over again the wind figures in the story. We hear of the south wind moving them, then the northeast wind takes them. And these aren't nice little breezes that tousle your hair, these are gales that prompted the writer of Acts to say the "the winds were against us", "we gave way to the wind and were driven by it." There is an unpredictability to the wind in the book of Acts. The writer doesn't make any specific connection between the Holy Spirit and the wind, apart from the rushing sound of the wind that came on Pentecost. But the presence of the wind in the lives of the first Christians spreading the gospel makes us think about the unpredictability of the Holy Spirit, it comes and goes as it chooses.

Jesus specifically links the wind with the Holy Spirit. The gospel of John records him saying, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (John 3:8) Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus about how he must be born of water and the Spirit. Nicodemus, the logical thinker, is stumped. He can't make sense of the Spirit. Jesus basically tells him that the Spirit is beyond our understanding. You can't control it. Like the wind, it comes from somewhere and goes somewhere. And you know something's happening when it is around.

I was speaking last week with someone about the Holy Spirit and we both said together the little poem "Who has seen the wind, neither you nor I, but when the trees bow down their heads, the wind is passing by." That Christina Rosetti poem captures something about the power of the wind, and our reverence in its presence.

In the passage of scripture that we read today from John 16, Jesus is talking about the Holy Spirit, but he uses a different name. He calls it the Spirit of Truth. How is the Spirit of Truth like the wind, I

wonder? When we speak the truth, do we have any idea of how it will change our lives, how it will change the world? We don't always know what the truth will do when we speak it.

We usually read Acts 2 on Pentecost, but I chose this passage of scripture because practically in the same breath that Jesus talks about the Spirit of Truth that God will give, he tells the disciples not to be afraid. "Let not your hearts be troubled neither let them be afraid." Jesus knew that the Spirit, this Spirit that comes with the sound of a mighty wind, is going to change things, is going to shake things up in unpredictable ways. It's going to blow the disciples from here to Kingdom Come. Fear not!

Just think of that day on Pentecost when the Spirit first arrived with a sound like a mighty wind. Something's happening, something's happening! The first thing that happened was that the disciples started talking, all at once, in languages that they didn't speak. The Holy Spirit gave them words to say, and they were speaking about God's works of power in every language of the world. Some marvelled to see that; but others said, "They're drunk!"

Can you imagine if you suddenly started speaking Chinese? Or if you opened your mouth and Arabic sentences came out? Would that be a calm peaceful experience, do you think, or an entirely startling and uncomfortable sensation? Would you necessarily know what the words meant that were coming out of your mouth? Would you risk making a spectacle of yourself…people might laugh at you. People laughed at the disciples! Would you start to wonder, what in the world could happen next?

Then Peter, who has never said more than a few words together at a time in the gospels, gets up and explains who Jesus was in such eloquent and passionate words that 3,000 people decide on the spot to be baptized and to become followers of Jesus.

Can you imagine being led by the Spirit to Churchill Square, where you start preaching, and thousands of people start listening to you. And then 3,000 people decide to get baptized? That is ridiculous, you say, you get nervous standing up and speaking here at Lendrum, let alone to a giant crowd of strangers! Up to this point in the gospels Peter has never addressed large groups of people, it was always Jesus doing that. Peter was the guy in the background watching.

What was it like for Peter after his big speech…what did he feel like on the evening of this day of Pentecost? I have a feeling that he wasn't so much happy and excited as overwhelmed and shocked, to have the Holy Spirit fill him and use him in such a dramatic way. And this was Day One with the Spirit! I wonder whether he was afraid as thought about the future. What would Day 2 look like, or Day 100? He was speaking with the type of power that Jesus had when he spoke, and look what happened to Jesus. I wonder if Peter was thinking about where this road, this road with the Holy Spirit, would lead him.

We see in the book of Acts how the wind of the Spirit was blowing, change was in the air. Something was happening.

Like the disciples on Pentecost, we still gather together, and we still ask for the Holy Spirit. As we sang our hymns today, we prayed for the Holy Spirit. "O Breath of Life, come sweeping through us, bend us, break us, remake us, bend us, revive, restore, renew us." The Spirit will give each as it chooses… And the Holy Spirit is working among us. Something's happening!

Someone, it could be anyone, is a very busy person. They have many jobs and responsibilities that they need to do each week, every week is full, every week is busy with important tasks. If you ask that person; do you have an extra twenty or thirty hours a week to devote to a new task over the next few months? Well, ask yourself that question! Do you have an extra twenty or thirty hours a week? Yet this someone, it could be anyone, it could be you, prays for the Holy Spirit.

And I have seen the Holy Spirit come in a mighty rush, a rush that started in the emergency room of a hospital; someone we love gets sick, someone we love is in trouble, someone needs us. And suddenly people who were very busy people, people with many tasks to do, are suddenly empowered, they are suddenly able to find time that they did not have before. People become caregivers in ways and in quantities of time that they would not have believed possible. Where before they were quite self absorbed and occupied with the tasks of daily living, suddenly they find their hearts filled with love and compassion, they have reserves of energy that were definitely not there before. It's exhausting, it's awe-inspiring to have this happen. Something happened with the Holy Spirit.

And someone, it could be anyone, is in the middle of pursuing their career. They are on the road to success! Yet this someone, it could be anyone, it could be you, prays for the Holy Spirit.

And I have seen the Holy Spirit fill them with new insight as they suddenly see different possibilities. They suddenly realize that they have been following Plan A for years but there is a Plan B that is calling their name. Maybe it's a term of service with a mission organization, with Mennonite Central Committee. Maybe it's going back to school to learn something new. And it's costly, in terms of money and time and personal relationships, and it's not easy and it is scary and it takes a long time. And sometimes people don't understand why you are doing it. But this someone is given the power to do these new things, things that people don't necessarily understand, they do something they would never believe they had the power to do. They look back and say it wasn't an easy experience, but it was a growing experience. Sometimes it was a long haul. Something happened with the Holy Spirit.

And someone, it could be anyone, is in the middle of being angry with someone. Maybe it's anger at a family member, or their best friend, maybe it's anger at a boss or a neighbour. This someone has been filled with words of anger and resentment and the best comebacks ever, and they are just about ready to burst with it all. Yet this someone, it could be anyone, it could be you, prays for the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit blows through them one day, and the hatred and the anger and the resentment disappear like so much sand in the wind. And next time they see the person they are angry with, they realize that they are filled with compassion and understanding. The person they are angry with is startled by a change in attitude. They are startled by loving actions and words. Something happened with the Holy Spirit.

I have seen this happening. It's the same power that was at work in the disciples, changing them into people who had the power to heal, to convert, to forgive. The Spirit giving those disciples words so that they could write powerful gospels that touch us today. The Spirit working in surprising, startling, even uncomfortable ways.

The Holy Spirit was active in the lives of the first Anabaptists. In the early 1500's Michael Sattler was a man who had made it to the top. He was a scholar, skilled in biblical Hebrew and Greek, and he was one of the leaders of a large monastery in the city of Freiburg. He had a position of power

and wealth, and many people looked up to him as he did God's work. And the wind of the Holy Spirit reached his heart.

He was suddenly unsettled in his regular life. He was drawn to new teaching, new ways of reading the Bible, new ways of doing church. He was baptized again as an adult, he became an Anabaptist. He wanted to follow the Jesus he read about in the gospels. This filling with the Holy Spirit meant that he had to leave his important position, his wealth. Instead of preaching in beautiful big cathedrals, he started preaching to gatherings of people in the woods, he had to hide out from the police, he had to be arrested and banished, he had to keep preaching; it was his new life in the spirit. Eventually he and his wife Veit Veringer were arrested.

The court received many pleas for mercy, for the couple was well-loved, and respected as good Christians. Then as now, all court proceedings were recorded, so we have word for word accounts of what was said and done at the trial. At Michael's trial he said that he believed he was following scripture, and he asked that he be given the opportunity to explain scripture from the original languages to the court, and that perhaps they would be converted, just as he had been. The record states that the judges burst out laughing at the idea that they could be taught and converted. Michael said, "We are sent to testify…we are ready to suffer… We will continue in our faith in Christ as long as we have breath…" The wind of the Holy Spirit continued to blow through them right up to the time they were executed in the city of Rottenburg, he was burned at the stake, she was drowned. The wind sometimes blows us right up a hill to Calvary.

Someone prays for the Holy Spirit, it could be anyone, it could be you. What happens when you pray for the Holy Spirit? You may be given power that you didn't expect, you may be given power that will surprise you, unsettle you, change your life. It can be a scary thing to think about being visited by the Holy Spirit. Sometimes we might think, I'd like the Holy Spirit, but only in this particular quantity, please. It's like you're going through the cafeteria line, and God is the woman behind the big pots, standing there with the ladle. And we are the people saying, "Just a small scoop, just a tiny piece. Just a taste. Oh, wait, that's way too much for me. Just half a ladleful, that will be enough for me."

I remember one time when I prayed for the Holy Spirit. I was going to the home of one of my church members who was dying. This church member was a pretty challenging man. Challenging for his family and his friends because he was a pretty negative person who had a lot of broken relationships around him. And in fact my relationship with him was not very healthy either. I had heard from other people how he would speak negatively of me to other people. But he had never addressed me to my face with his criticisms, so I had always just tried to be nice to him.

As I was driving to this man's house I was thinking, this is probably the last pastoral visit I am going to have with him. And this man needs a change of heart. He needs a big change. I knew I couldn't make that happen, what we needed was a miracle. So I prayed to God to send the Holy Spirit, to come and heal all this brokenness.

And so I went into the house, the family was gathered on the main floor, there were a couple of people there he hadn't talked to in years. They were hoping that he would agree to see them. The nurse told my church member I was there, and he said he would see me. So she told me to follow her upstairs. Before she let me into his room she said, you can just have a few minutes, he's very weak. I'll signal you when it's time for you to come out. So I went in.

He was indeed very sick. He began the conversation with the words, "I think this is just about the end of my life," and I agreed that yes, it was about the end of his life. And we talked about how he was feeling for a bit. And I said, "Since you are so near the end, is there anyone you still need to make peace with?" I was thinking of some of the people I had just passed by who he was estranged from. And he said, "No, I'm at peace." And I knew it wasn't true. And he went on to say some negative things about people. And as he talked I felt this irritation growing inside me for this person. Inside I was thinking, "Here you are on your deathbed and you are still saying negative things! You are throwing away this last chance." That's that I was thinking on the inside. And I felt this wave of irritation and dislike flow through me for this stubborn old man.

And then something happened. I can only describe it like a big whoosh. It was a physical sensation, like something that passed like a wave through my whole body, from top to bottom. I was suddenly filled with an overwhelming sense of love for this man. I felt this huge wave of tenderness for him, like I could see him through and through. And I looked at him and he was entirely lovable, entirely beautiful and so dear to me. It just came over me in an instant. I had been sitting at the foot of the bed on a chair, and I immediately went and knelt down on the floor next to the bed. And I leaned over and held his hand, and I said a prayer of blessing over him on this final journey, and when I was done I kissed him on his forehead. And he said, "Thank you dear." And at that exact moment the nurse came in and said, "It's time to go."

I stumbled out of the house, got into my car and I just sat there shaking, saying over and over, "What just happened, what just happened?" I knew what just happened. I was the minister sitting there feeling irritated at a stubborn old man. But I had prayed for the Holy Spirit to come down to heal the brokenness. The Spirit showed up. I just hadn't expected that it was my brokenness that needed to be healed. I had no idea how far away I had been from feeling love for this person.

I need to tell you that it was not a warm and wonderful experience with the Spirit. This was a falling on your knees uncomfortable experience, a convicting experience. This was a profoundly humbling experience that showed me how far away I mostly am from where God wants me to be.

On that first Pentecost day the Holy Spirit came with a sound of rushing wind. Like a mighty wind, God's holy wind could move you in a direction you are not expecting. It's shocking, its unsettling, it will leave you changed.

This is the Holy Spirit that anyone can ask for. That you can ask for. A Spirit that moves you with a holy wind, making you into a true disciple, transformed by the power of God at work within you.

This week you will see places in the world where there is brokenness, where people need the Holy Spirit so badly? Pray for the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit will come. But be prepared. It's not about those people over there being changed; those people over there with their problems being transformed. God will change you. The Holy Spirit will use fire and wind to blow through you, to burn through you, to make you incandescent, brilliant with love.

Comfortable? No. Easy? No. The Holy Spirit blows where it will. It burns with Holy fire. But brothers and sisters, this is what we pray for, this is what we long for; for God to do in us infinitely more than all we can ask or imagine.

Let's pray now:

God, you know the hearts of all of us here. You know the places where we are, and you know where you want us to go, and what you want us to do there. Fill us with your Holy Spirit. Take away our fear, so that our hearts can be always, only, all for you. Amen.

John 3;8 The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.'

John 14:15-17, 25-27
'If you love me,
you will keep my commandments.
And I will ask the Father,
and he will give you another Advocate,
to be with you for ever.
This is the Spirit of truth,
whom the world cannot receive,
because it neither sees him nor knows him.
You know him, because he abides with you,
and he will be in you.
'I have said these things to you while I am still with you.
But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit,
whom the Father will send in my name,
will teach you everything,
and remind you of all that I have said to you.
Peace I leave with you;
my peace I give to you.
I do not give to you as the world gives.
Do not let your hearts be troubled,
and do not let them be afraid.

Psalm 104:1-13
Bless the LORD, O my soul.
O LORD my God, you are very great.
You are clothed with honour and majesty,
wrapped in light as with a garment.
You stretch out the heavens like a tent,
you set the beams of your chambers on the waters,
you make the clouds your chariot,
you ride on the wings of the wind,
you make the winds your messengers,
fire and flame your ministers.

You set the earth on its foundations,
so that it shall never be shaken.
You cover it with the deep as with a garment;
the waters stood above the mountains.
At your rebuke they flee;
at the sound of your thunder they take to flight.
They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys
to the place that you appointed for them.
You set a boundary that they may not pass,
so that they might not again cover the earth.

You make springs gush forth in the valleys;
they flow between the hills,

giving drink to every wild animal;
  the wild asses quench their thirst.
By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation;
  they sing among the branches.
From your lofty abode you water the mountains;
  the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.