

Chasing the Spirit

Acts 2:1-21

I have long said it's an utter shame that there's no guide to the emotive content of our Bibles.

There are, after all, all different kinds of Bibles. You know, the Women's Study Bible, the New Women's Study Bible, the Archaeology Study Bible, the Action Hero Bible, the Johnny Cash Bible (not lying), the Bible for Dummies...it's completely plausible that someone could undertake a project called, The Emotional Bible, or something like that.

Why? Well, I think it would be helpful to know that Jesus said a certain thing sarcastically, or with exasperation, that he smiled while he rebuked them so they knew it was a joke, or he rolled his eyes while the Pharisees gave him a hard time...or that the disciples were sad, or spoke with urgency...you know, emotive qualifiers like that. I just think our experience of reading the Bible would be so much richer if we had that insight, don't you?

Alas, we'll have to wait and ask the gang what they really felt later. In the meantime, it's up to us to try our best to understand on an emotional level what the first disciples felt as they lived through those action-packed days following Jesus' resurrection.

An emotive guide would be especially helpful, I think, this week, when a quick reading of the text for today will tell us that what was happening on the Day of Pentecost was no regular, run of the mill experience. Emotions must have been running at their highest.

You can suppose this from the very start of the chapter, when the relief in Luke, the writer's, voice, is almost audible to us two thousand years later. He begins the second chapter of the book of Acts, "When the Day of Pentecost had come..." which almost sounds to my ears like, "When the Day of Pentecost had FINALLY come (he said with utter relief in his voice)..."

The Greek word for come here means something like fulfilled, realized... Luke was saying that what they had been waiting for was finally here! After all of this time, after running around after Jesus trying to keep up with him and with what he was saying, after living through hell and all the horror around crucifixion, after standing there, wide-eyed while he ascended into the heavens, after all of that...after it all, the Day of Pentecost was finally here. Jesus had said that they would receive help from on high, and they were still waiting. Surely the Day of Pentecost would be the time when whatever help from on high Jesus mentioned (was he coming back??!?) would arrive to fix everything and get them out of that upper room once and for all.

The disciples were gathered again in that room, the text says, ready for the celebration of the Festival of Weeks, or Shavuot. Shavuot is an important Jewish festival that commemorates the time when the first fruits were harvested and brought to the Temple. But from a religious perspective, the festival celebrates the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. In other words, it's a festival for the giving of life—fruits from the earth to sustain us and guidelines from heaven by which we order our lives.

Shavuot is celebrated 7 full weeks after Passover, so we have some sense of the timeframe in which the disciples are functioning. All of this—all the stories we read, the appearances of Jesus, the shock of the empty

tomb, the surging hope of his post resurrection appearances, the grief and confusion of his leaving on ascension... all of this had happened in the seven weeks since the LAST time they'd gathered together in a room to celebrate a significant Jewish feast. Remember that? It seemed like yesterday to them that they had gathered in the upper room to share the Passover meal the night it all began.... And here they were again, gathered for a festival of their faith, waiting for Jesus' promise to unfold, not sure what would happen next, but sure that it was something important, something that would come to help them, to answer their questions, to set things to right once and for all.

It's a wonder they hadn't learned by then...it's a wonder we haven't learned by now...that God is not a God of easy answers or convenient fixes. Instead, when God blows into our lives, into our world, things get a little bit unsettled...they change all the time...they are always shifting with the gusts of God's Spirit. And we cannot follow the Spirit while we are locked away in our safe little rooms clinging to tradition and life as we know it. No, we're called to chase the Spirit, follow the call of God, whichever strange places it might call us.

I don't know what your mental image of the Sahara Desert is, but mine is one of extreme heat and mind-numbing monotony—sand dune after sand dune the same as far as your eye can see. It's huge! The Sahara Desert stretches 1200 miles from the Mediterranean Ocean into central Africa.

Recently, a National Geographic and NPR program called "Radio Expeditions" produced a series on the desert life of the Sahara. The reporter, Alex Chadwick, traveling from Timbuktu, followed a camel caravan through the desert along the same route that they have traveled

for over a thousand years, to the great salt mines of Mali.

The caravan came upon a village in the middle of the desert, a village named Araouane. Araouane was built on low land, like a bowl in the desert, to provide some protection from the strong winds and the constantly shifting sands. All that stands in the village are a few single-story mud buildings, a mosque and a well. Mr. Chadwick interviewed an old woman who had lived in Araouane all her life, as had her family for many generations; she had never left her village in her whole entire life.

He asked her about the winds, which blew sand constantly over her house. She said that everyday she got up, everything looked different, and she went out and tried to shovel the Sahara away.

And . . . day after day, week in and week out, caravans make their way over that terrain, clearing a path that would only be covered up again whenever the wind decided to blow, a landscape at the mercy of the sand and the wind, reformatting everything in its wake. Every single day the landscape looks totally different because the minute the winds start, everything changes.

What a strange situation the blowing of the wind creates. For us humans bent on assimilation and institution, it's downright disconcerting to live in a situation where everything is changing all the time. And this image of wind blowing is certainly not the first image I would associate with the institution of the church, this place and experience that becomes a fixture in so many of our lives, a place that serves as backdrop for our memories and refuge in the times that life leaves us battered.

In fact, it seems utterly bizarre to me that today, on the Day of Pentecost, the birthday of the church—that great institution in which we have come to understand and express our faith—we hear a story about

wind: shifting and changing, blowing everything we'd come to expect away and leaving us gazing out over a whole different landscape.

If we feel rattled by the blowing of God's Spirit, think about how the disciples must have felt. There they sat, no doubt going over and over again the events of the last few weeks, and the text says there was a sound like a rushing wind, violent, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

There's nothing staid or normal about any of that.

A few years ago I traveled to Lynchburg, Virginia, to speak at a gathering of 600 Virginia Baptist pastors. I was there to speak on a panel about revitalizing the modern church, to explore with other pastors and church leaders how we might "do church" in such a way that it is vital and relevant for modern folks.

Of course, this is a topic all of us church professionals love to explore. We long for a prescription or idea, a formula or a structure that will make the church, this institution we love, alive and well in a society that increasingly disregards its relevance. For three, two-hour panel sessions, I sat up front with two other pastors and fielded questions from the crowd.

What should we do, many asked, about the burning question of whether or not to install a screen at the front of the church? How should I handle the uproar over the use of drums in worship? What kind of building should we build to attract new members?

I didn't have the answers to these questions, and, believe me, if I had I would not have been spending my weekend in Lynchburg, Virginia telling

my secrets to 600 pastors who could just as easily purchase my slickly packaged program for church success!

In response to the increasingly frustrated questions from the audience asking for a plan or a formula or a fail-safe strategy, one of the other pastors on the panel, the pastor of First Baptist Church in Fredericksburg, told the story of how his church does ministry: he called it “a ministry of chaos.”

You could almost see the horror on the faces of those listening as he explained that anybody in their church who feels God’s direction leading them to try something new, a new kind of ministry within the church or within the community, is empowered to do that. Sometimes, he told us, ideas take off, like the basketball league for at-risk youth, which has now become the biggest sports program in Fredericksburg and radically helped reduce the gang problem in their community. And sometimes ideas don’t work well, like a mid-day worship service that no one attended because there are not enough people working in the immediate neighborhood of the church.

When ideas take off, he told us, the church runs with them. When they don’t, the church stops them and tries something else. It’s always changing, ever-fluid—a ministry of chaos!

I was trying to imagine coming to the Church Council and proposing my next harebrained idea: a Ministry of Chaos!, all the while reflecting internally on how hard it is for we humans, who push and push to institutionalize our ideas, our faith, to live with something like a ministry of chaos.

One pastor got up to respond and said that, while he appreciated what the staff at FBC Fredericksburg was saying, he could not imagine how that

would ever work at his church. He explained: life is so chaotic anyway. Our society moves at such a mind-numbing pace, asking us to change constantly, to learn new things and adjust all the time. How could he possibly ask his people to allow their church, the one hour of refuge and stability in their otherwise shifting lives, to change?

The pastor of FBC Fredericksburg looked at that man and asked: “How could you not?”

How could you not?

The disciples learned an important lesson that day when the wind of God’s Spirit blew in. They learned that following God is never a static endeavor that we could ever easily package or explain or expect. In fact, just when we think we have God figured out, the wind of God’s Spirit blows in and changes the landscape of our relationship with God, then takes us to places we’d never expect, not in a million years.

This is hard for us. It’s hard for us who like stability and institution. It’s hard for us who like to know what’s coming and predict next best steps. It’s hard for us who build buildings and plan programs and want so hard to know God in a way that provides comfort and answers and situations we can come to expect.

But this is not the God we follow.

The God we follow blows into our lives and turns them on their heads, changing everything we expected and landing us in places we never thought we’d be.

Coming up this very week, we will celebrate 150 years as a family of faith here on the corner of H and 8th Streets NW. For 150 years there has been a church here, doing ministry and trying to be the people of God in

this place. I am fairly sure that church in 1862 did not look a bit like church does in 2012, but still here we are. And we're here because people of faith have had the courage to chase the wind of God's Spirit wherever it leads.

May we have the courage to chase the ever changing wind of God's Spirit as God's lead even us to whatever is next.

Amen.