

Sunday May 19, 2024

First Lesson: Psalm 139: 13-14

Gospel Reading: John 15: 26-27; 16:4b-15

Sermon Series: Becoming: Transparent

Preacher: Kirstie J. Engel

We are concluding our Becoming Sermon Series ; a sermon series designed to take us on a 50 day journey towards Pentecost that equates to be exactly 7 Sundays between Easter and Holy Pentecost.

- Well today is indeed Holy Pentecost and I would be remiss if I did not specifically express thanksgiving for Judy Lane, Marty Eischied and the entire Flower Ministry for their beautiful artistic vision of flowers and artistic expression in addition to Tom and Shirley James who have lovingly changed our holy paraments to reflect the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in the red and orange flames that represents a powerful symbolism of what this Advocate in our gospel story is naming that we are about to unpack more during our conversation together this morning.

- I am also thankful for the flower Ministry for allowing Stephen and I to add to the beauty of this chancel with peonies that was lovingly gifted by my father-in law Robert Engel from his own garden.
- In each bouquet you will find a rare peony that came from Steve and my own landscaping; a special peony that was given to us by seed by my late grandmother Sue Jean Brooks that has finally taken bloom.
- All of this visual and artistic beauty really helps usher me into describing why we have designed an entire sermon series that would build momentum for this special day of Holy Pentecost.
- For Holy Pentecost is more than a historical event; it is a timeless call to transformation and empowerment.
- This particular season of transformation and empowerment is rooted in the biblical passage of Acts 2:1-4, that commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles, igniting a spiritual awakening that transcends generations.

- This event of Pentecost invites you and I to open our hearts to the Spirit's presence in our daily lives, fostering unity, inspiration, and purposeful action.
- **I am referring to a purposeful action** that invites you and I to become the living witness and agent of what Jesus in his ministry has been ushering all of his disciples to follow;
- **A Pathway** that will heal those who are brokenhearted;
- **A pathway** that will set the **captives free**;
- **A pathway** where the **prisoners** will be released;
- **A pathway** where all will live a life full and abundantly.
- However in order for this pathway **to become fully transparent** to the people of that time and era, the story of Acts shares with us that something needed to occur first for the people **to be able to detect it**.
- On the day when Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.
- Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.

- **They saw** what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.
- All of them at this sight were then filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.
- **Therefore to summarize and connect the story of Acts to our Gospel lesson this morning, what made this Advocate transparent to the people that is being named in our gospel today as the Holy Spirit —was an event described as the sound of a violent wind that ultimately catches their attention.**
- Violent winds that stirs up an imagery for me similar to the tornadoes that have been occurring globally in our country over the past few weeks.
- Over the past 90 days alone, the United States has experienced a series of significant tornadoes, affecting various states including our own state of Nebraska, Texas, Ohio, Georgia, and beyond.
- **On May 3, 2024, Nebraska** was hit by multiple tornadoes, including an EF1 tornado near Holdrege. This tornado caused damage to homes, snapped wooden

poles, and overturned irrigation pivots. Another EF1 tornado affected Atlanta, Nebraska, damaging a home's roof before dissipating.

- **The Houston area experienced a notable tornado on April 10, 2024.** An EF1 tornado touched down in Katy, a suburb west of Houston, causing significant damage to a strip center and other local businesses. Not to mention - A line of severe thunderstorms swept through southeastern Texas and Louisiana on this past-Thursday with 100 mph winds.
- **On May 7, 2024, Ohio was impacted** by a high-end EF2 tornado during a significant outbreak across the Midwest. This tornado caused severe damage in areas including Union City and prompted emergency responses. The storm system brought multiple tornadoes, leading to widespread destruction across Ohio and neighboring states.
- **In early February 2024, Georgia was struck by several tornadoes**, including an EF2 near Valdosta. This tornado destroyed multiple manufactured homes and caused injuries. It was part of a broader severe

weather system that also affected Florida and the Carolinas, resulting in fatalities and extensive property damage.

- Finally, Florida experienced significant tornado activity on February 4, 2024, with several tornadoes hitting the state. An EF2 tornado near Marianna caused extensive damage to residential areas and RV parks.
- Not to mention, for those who catches some of their news on social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram and Tiktok as I typically do, it can be easily noted many curious individuals throughout the country; capturing amazing cell phone camera footage of these spectacular yet, terrifying tornadoes that in some cases— appeared to be only a few feet away from them—where the sound of the storm seemed to freeze time.
- In some of these tornado videos, I have heard the tornado sirens blaring in the background as the relatives are urgently beckoning their loved one who is taking the video to hurry up and take cover; followed by a response from the one who is filming..."Just another moment— wow this tornado is amazing," or some other

proclamation of wonder and terror laced in their voice at the same time.

- Either way, this is the event that I imagine is being described in our gospel today when the opening verse informs us in verse 26 that "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf.
- One of our class participants on Wednesday Night Applying the Sermon to Life Class raised the question, well isn't the Holy Spirit the Advocate; the same spirit that descended like a dove upon Jesus at his baptism but didn't stick around?
- What then is the difference between that Holy Spirit and this Holy Spirit described at Pentecost?
- For me I would proclaim that we are indeed talking about the same Holy Spirit that can indeed come in many forms and fashion.
- For me the Holy Spirit is often understood as God's presence and action in the world, and its manifestations can be diverse, ranging from subtle to dramatic.

- **The Holy Spirit can be like** a silent whisper that gently nudges or prompt an individual towards a certain action or decision, often experienced as a quiet inner voice or intuition.
- **The Holy Spirit can be like** a profound sense of peace, comfort, or assurance during difficult times is often attributed to the Holy Spirit's presence.
- **The Holy Spirit can be like** a guide of one's conscience, helping discern right from wrong and leading to feelings of conviction about moral or ethical issues.
- **The Holy Spirit can provide** clarity and understanding in complex situations, offering wisdom beyond natural human capacity.
- However from my perspective, why the Holy Spirit is being described in such a dynamic, yet almost menacing way- where I have connected the violent winds to to be similar to that of this powerful imagery of the recent tornadoes we all have been experiencing— is because in our story today, the Advocate is promising to deliver a divine truth to the people.

- **I am referring to a divine truth** that I imagine might have disrupted a lot of people's current worldviews.
- **I am seeing a divine truth** that might even challenge and perhaps discredit a lot of people's personal upbringing.
- For the book of John as a whole, but particularly in the passage we are reading today, brings the contemporary reader face to face with some of the most complex issues raised by the sectarianism of this Fourth gospel, because in these particular verses, the lines between the faith community and the "world" are more sharply drawn than anywhere else in the Gospel.
- For starters the book of John would essentially name Jesus as more divine than any other gospel, which would have greatly **challenged** the existing Jewish monotheistic beliefs as a whole.
- The declaration of Jesus as the Word (Logos) who was with God and was God; this idea of God as a duality

or trinity would have been heretical or even polytheistic to the Judaic belief.

- Jesus' actions and teachings in John often occurred during significant Jewish festivals, such as Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles. His healing on the Sabbath (John 5:1-18) and reinterpretation of these festivals' meanings— **challenged** the traditional Jewish understanding and observance of these holy days.
- Jesus' interactions with marginalized individuals, such as the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-42), the healing of the man born blind (John 9), and the raising of Lazarus (John 11), illustrate a radical inclusivity that transcends ethnic, social, and religious barriers. This inclusiveness was countercultural and posed **a direct challenge** to the societal norms of the time.

- **Church family there are many other instances with the book of John— that would challenge the culture that it was directed towards in that day.**
- Thereby making it perhaps more understandable why this Holy Spirit that is showing up in our text today is like that of a violent wind, like an EF5 tornado with estimated wind speeds greater than 200 miles per hour.
- For as I take this gospel to our current context today, I would be remiss if I did not name that throughout our history, the rights of many people have not been considered and have been suppressed.
- For the world has endured and suffered through a wide range of inequalities, affecting various aspects of life; **from** gender inequality to racial and ethnic inequality;
- **From** racial and ethnic inequality to social inequality;
- And I give thanks to Ralph Ebers who sometimes shares interesting articles and readings with me; the most latest article he shared with me— came

from the *Lincoln Journal Star* whose title identified “The Methodists Keep Up with the times,” where in citing the article it says that “The United Methodist Church at its General Conference last week voted by large margins to lift its ban on practicing homosexual clergy and to eliminate from its “Social Principles,” the statement that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teachings;”

- This has been a long awaited victory for many who have been fighting tirelessly for inclusion and justice for all within the Methodist Church.
- I would be remiss if I did not name that for some, this news is like that of an EF5 tornado— **because it challenges** the foundation that perhaps some were raised in; **for some it challenges** the foundations of the faith that some were brought up in.
- Thereby leaving the tension of our gospel for us to consider, how we might work through some of these challenges this sermon has raised and more, even if it feels like we are in a tornado while doing so?

- And this is when staying in this tornado imagery, I decided to google, can a tornado bring any good?
- What I learned is that while tornadoes are devastating natural disasters that cause significant destruction and loss of life, I was encouraged to discover that there are some potential positive effects that can result indirectly from their occurrence.
- Some of these benefits are not inherent to the tornadoes themselves, but arise from the aftermath and the responses to these events.
- In the aftermath of a tornado for instance, many communities often review and strengthen building codes to make structures more resistant to future storms. This can lead to improved construction practices and safer buildings.
- Architects and engineers develop innovative building designs and materials to better withstand tornadoes, contributing to overall improvements in construction technology.

- Tornadoes can spur communities to develop better emergency preparedness plans, including more effective warning systems, evacuation plans, and public education on safety measures.
- Environmentally, tornadoes can clear out dense forests and underbrush, allowing sunlight to reach the forest floor and promoting new plant growth. This can lead to a more diverse and rejuvenated ecosystem.
- **There is one other outcome of a tornado that gives me some hope as well;**
- To oversimplify this a bit, a tornado (or any other atmospheric vortex) is the most efficient way to move air from one part of the atmosphere to another on its size and time scale.
- For me this is the greatest news that the great Advocate has come to make transparent to us all;
- That for the brokenhearted to be comforted,
- For the captives to be released,

- For the prisoners to be freed,
- A powerful wind of change would need to take place..
- **A wind of empowerment** that would sweep through the hearts and minds of God's people, enabling us to carry out God's mission of love for all despite obstacles and challenges.
- **A wind of unity** that will blow away barriers of whatever bias we may hold, fostering a sense of common purpose and solidarity among us all.
- **A wind of transformation that** will take us from a place of fear and uncertainty into bold witnesses of our faith in love.
- When I think about the social tornadoes we are in as the Church and beyond— this is why I can find some sort of calm in the midst of these raging storms;
- For although the sounds can be deafening—
- The winds can be overwhelming—

- And the overall social climate and temperature sometimes causes me to want to hide in my basement—
- I have found myself instead watching in awe and wonder because Church family the winds of change are here— and it is glorious!
- The **winds of change is here**—where every voice is being heard, and every story is becoming valued,
- **The winds of change is here** where every soul is empowered and encouraged to thrive.
- **The winds of change are here**—for there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for we are all one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 2: 28-29;
- **The winds of change are here** that informs us all as that we are not alone in the midst of this storm,
- You and I are sheltered beneath the mighty wings of the Most High;

- The rainbow of God's covenant is with humanity even in the midst of our most pressing challenges and storms,
- God's Spirit, the Great Advocate, is our comforter, our guide, our strength whom by our side, we need not tremble in fear.
- But instead let us Lift every voice and sing, Till earth and heaven ring, Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
The winds of change are here.
- **Amen and Hallelujah!**