



“Catch the Wind Part 1”

May 23, 2021

Romans 8:22-27; Acts 2:1-4

Rev. Andy Call, Lead Pastor

2537 Lee Road
Cleveland Heights, OH 44118-4136
Telephone: 216-321-8880
Website: www.COTSumc.org

Paul’s words to the Roman church weren’t written for a pandemic, but they could have been. “We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labor pains up until now.” It feels like we’ve been waiting for a long time for something new to come, and some of that waiting has been painful.

I’ve been privileged to be in the birthing room when each of our three children was born. I’ve been further privileged not to be the one actually giving birth. So I’m a little more reluctant than Paul to compare our waiting to being in labor. But I do know the aching of longing for the future, whether for a specific outcome or just a distant hope. We all do.

The truth is that we felt a longing well before COVID-19 turned our lives upside-down. We’re increasingly pulled apart by politics, by demands on our time and our budgets, by anxieties and fears about the future. We feel the collective pain of being part of a nation that hasn’t yet come to terms with its own past, a history built in part on lies and half-truths about who and what has value and who has the right to determine that value. Churches argue over theological differences, energy better spent on mission. Every single idea in our society becomes politicized, judged rarely on its own merits but by how it is viewed by others on “our side.” It’s not just humans, but all creation that is groaning under the strain of climate change and accompanying natural disasters, though humans must be part of the solution. We sense that we are in the process of becoming, but what we are becoming is not yet clear. We hope that what is coming is from God and that it will be for our benefit, but we fear things may get worse before they get better. We don’t know what to pray for or even how to pray. But, thank God, the Spirit helps us by doing the praying for us, expressing a hope that is beyond words. We need not see all the details of the future God has for us in order to place our hope in it.

The Disciples on that Day of Pentecost hoped for a future they could not yet see. Jesus had promised that power from on high was coming, though they couldn’t yet fathom where it would take them. Suddenly, a sound like the howling of a fierce wind filled the place where they were gathered, and the Holy Spirit came upon them, giving them power to carry the message of the risen Christ to the ends of the earth. That was the beginning of the church, the birth of the movement we celebrate and carry on today.

The Bible uses several images for the Holy Spirit: breath, fire, a dove. But I’ve always been most intrigued by the description of the Holy Spirit as wind. There’s something both common and mysterious about the wind. It is a part of our shared experience. The wind can bring cooling breezes on a warm summer afternoon or carry snow on a midwinter’s night. Having sons who play baseball, I know the discomfort a stiff northerly wind can bring when you’re sitting in a lawn chair in an open field on a dreary day.

Though the image of wind to describe the Holy Spirit may mean *something* to all of us, no one knows the wind better than those who sail. Mariners have an intimate knowledge of the wind and a close relationship with it. So, I asked several experienced sailors in our congregation to help me shape the message for our celebration of Pentecost today and Trinity Sunday next week through their experiences and perspectives.

One thing that becomes immediately apparent when talking to people who sail about being on the water is their close kinship with others who sail. Strong bonds are formed when crewing a vessel together. There’s a shared language of lines and spars and sails that mere landlubbers like me struggle to understand. And there’s a kind of metaphysical knowing that comes from feeling the wind and learning how to read it. Linda Merriam writes:

It is a sailor’s delight to harness the wind and power a sailboat through sparkling water on sun-filled days and under moonlit skies, silent except for the sound of the waves glistening away from the hull as it slices through the water. And it is with awe to endure the rage of a storm’s fierce wind while in a small sailboat on the open water. Wind, while allowing sailors to witness God’s wonder and beauty, also humbles us, and always reminds us who is boss.

Linda's spouse Steve adds:

For me it is hard to separate the experience of sailing from the Wind itself (Steve capitalizes *Wind* to personify it and as a sign of respect). Experienced mariners sense a second nature relationship with the Wind. Dependence bordering on helplessness breeds patience plus a healthy respect for the risks.

Chris Bartel articulated a theme shared by all. "Sailors do not control the wind, only react to it." Diana Merriam echoed, "We sailors have learned how to look at the ripples on the water and know how much wind is coming, and also (from) what direction it is coming."

Paying attention to the signs of changes in the wind is essential, as Lin Bartel can attest. She has been for years part of a group called "The Wet Hens" (though her children growing up referred to them as the "Soggy Chickens"). One day, Lin was out with another friend in a Thistle, a 17' wooden sailboat. They'd had a pleasant day of weather and conversation, and were coming into Mentor Harbor. As often happens, the wind shifted. But, according to Lin, they were so engrossed in conversation and laughter that they didn't realize the change in wind until it was too late. That 17' sailboat missed the marina entrance and ended up on the beach!

Though you may not be a wet hen (or a soggy chicken), you've likely found yourself metaphorically beached a time or two in your life. There have been times I resisted the Spirit or just flat out didn't pay attention to the movement of the Spirit in my life. In those times, I've been stuck, emotionally and spiritually, sometimes even physically. I'll bet you have, too – a job that is no longer fulfilling or without promise of advancement, a relationship that has dried up, a spiritual desert where going through the motions just isn't enough anymore. The problem may not be that the Spirit is no longer present, but that the wind shifted and we didn't.

If we're going to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit, we have to give up the illusion of control. Sailors know this because they live it. Trying to direct the wind is pointless. Steve says, "It is the Wind's schedule, not human plans, that dictate the voyage." Chris shared wisdom gained through experience: If you're planning to just head out for a cruise with friends, stay flexible. You may not be able to go exactly where you want to go or in the time you want to. The wind will determine what is possible and what isn't, and your schedule doesn't matter one bit to the wind. Sometimes, even well-planned races have to change their course or cancel altogether if the wind changes.

In nautical terms, there are three points of sail. *Beating* is sailing into the wind. Actually, you can't sail directly into the wind – that's the "no-go zone." But if you want to travel into the direction the wind is coming from, you have to tack – sail at an angle to the wind, then change and sail at the opposite angle and repeat. Progress is slower, not just because of the resistance of the wind, but because you end up traveling almost twice as far to cover the same linear distance. *Reaching* is when the wind comes across the beam or from the side of the boat. This is often the most enjoyable sailing because the sails fill, the boat glides easily, and you can still feel the wind. *Running* is when the wind is directly behind you. The sail is set perpendicular to the wind, and a spinnaker or "balloon sail" is often added to increase surface area. Because the boat is sailing at a rate of speed close to that of the wind, you don't feel it as much. It's also easy to be surprised in that circumstance, because as you are looking forward and not feeling the wind, it's easy to misjudge the wind's strength or to miss a change in its direction.

While non-sailors sometimes conceive of the wind as being relatively constant, mariners know that the wind is always changing, both in intensity and direction. Setting a course that has you beating into the wind can suddenly turn into a no-go situation, necessitating a new course (if you can move at all). Sailing a reach still requires constant attention to the shifts of the wind and adjustments in the trim of the sail or the rudder. Experienced sailors watch for signs of the changing wind on the water or in the aspect of other boats. By reading the signs, the skipper can anticipate changes and adjust to take full advantage of the wind. That's not easy; mistaking a momentary puff of wind for a more sustained change and adjusting trim can cause the boat to lose speed; that's annoying on a pleasure cruise but can be devastating in a race. Linn Raney pointed out that, even when the wind seems to be constant, the direction and handling of the boat change the effect of the wind on the vessel. The boat is in continuous motion, changing the orientation relative to the wind. Sailing requires constant attention and adjustment.

If the Holy Spirit is like wind, then there is much we can learn from sailing. Trying to go opposite to where the Spirit is leading us can cause our spiritual lives to stall. We might choose to persist on our course by taking a slightly different angle, but it will be like beating against the wind (and we should be prepared to get a soaking from the

surrounding water). Running with the Spirit can be exhilarating. Sometimes, when we sense the Spirit's calling, we are ready to cast off all constraints, set as much sail as possible, and just go. But it's easy to misjudge those moments; is the Spirit calling us to change direction completely, or is it calling for a more gentle course correction? When we find the right balance, we can sense where the Spirit is leading and enjoy the journey. But life isn't always smooth sailing. We're human beings, prone to lose our focus or miss the winds of change. Sometimes, we get so comfortable where we are that we just quit paying attention and fail to see when it's time for us to strike out into new waters.

Lin Bartel shared another story that illustrates that point. She was racing in a regatta, a series of races leading to a title. It was the Zephyr Trophy race, and Lin's boat was in the lead – *way* in the lead. The finish line was in sight, and she and her crew were comfortably cruising through the final leg. But they had gotten too comfortable. They hit a lull, a point in the water where the wind was just gone. Others had been aggressively pursuing any wind they could find, pressing every advantage. While Lin and her mates watched helplessly, Noreen Collins zipped right by them and won the race – and the trophy. Lin's friend and shipmate Carol Mock never let her forget it, either.

We don't want to end up stuck in the doldrums or spiritually blown wildly off course. Sailors pay attention to the luff of the sail or the ripples on the water. How can we find the movement of the Spirit in our lives? A good place to start is with prayer. Prayer begins with attention. Make a point to stop what you're doing and focus your attention on God, to be silent and just listen. It's amazing how little truly quiet time we have in our lives. I encourage us as part of our five practices of faithful discipleship to pray five times a day, and I have suggested starting with a simple prayer: "Thank you, God." Another way of praying that can be helpful for becoming quiet and centered is called a *breath prayer*. Breath prayer helps us be attentive to our breath while repeating a phrase or words from scripture. We can practice this together right now. Let's use a phrase from Psalm 46: "Be still and know that I am God." Since we're praying to God, we'll change the orientation to be "you" instead of "I." Start with a breath in, and then a breath out. Pay attention to the air entering your lungs, filling you with God's presence. Then breathe that same presence back out. (We couldn't do this a few weeks ago!). Now, as you inhale, think the words "Be still." As you exhale, think the words, "and know that you are God." Continue to do that. Feel the presence of God's Spirit enter in and emanate out.

It takes more than a few moments of silent meditation to follow the Spirit, but prayer is a great place to start. As we learn to slow our action and listen for God, we can begin to tune our attention to the movement of the Spirit. We engage in the other practices, too – on our own and with others – to keep practicing God's presence. Just as sailors prepare early in the morning, hoping for a wind yet to come, we place our hope in God – not because we can always see where God is taking us, but because God can be trusted. And if we can learn to be attentive to God's Spirit, who knows? Maybe God can change the world through us, too. Amen