

LOOK WHO JUST BLEW IN!¹
Acts 2: 1-21
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
May 23, 2010

In Hebrew the word is *ruach*; in Greek the word is *pneumatos*. It means wind or breath or spirit. Your body is filled with it, and when it leaves your body life as we know it ends. It forms a membrane around the earth that we call our atmosphere, and there would be no life on earth without it. A scientist thinks of it as 78% nitrogen, 21% oxygen, 1% argon, and .03% carbon dioxide. A meteorologist thinks of it as air on the move due to constant temperature changes on the face of the earth. A pilot thinks of it as lift; a sailor thinks of it as power; an environmentalist thinks of it as a generator of clean energy.

It's great for flying kites or sailing on the lake or windsurfing on the ocean. It causes problems for golfers; it can turn a double into a home run over the green monster; it can harden snow for skiers; it can make fly fishing downright impossible; it can hold up hang gliders; and it can cool our faces at the close of a hot day.

¹ ©Thomas R. McKibbens, May 23, 2010.

Our faith is filled with wind—not hot air, but wind! The ancient Jews did not think of wind like a scientist or a meteorologist or as a pilot. They thought of wind as sheer mystery. They couldn't see it, but they could feel it, and they knew something powerful was there. They sometimes called God *ruach*, wind...spirit...breath. In fact, anyone who picks up the Bible and starts at the beginning finds the term in the very first sentence. In describing the creation, the story says that *the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep and the ruach of God swept over the face of the waters.*² It was the wind...the breath of God in creation! It was as if God was giving mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to the earth and blew life into our planet!

James Weldon Johnson, in *God's Trombones*, described the creation of humanity this way:

*Up from the bed of the river
 God scooped the clay;
 And by the bank of the river
 Kneeled down;
 And there the great God Almighty
 Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
 Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,
 Who rounded the earth in the middle of his hand;
 This Great God,
 Like a mammy bending over her baby,
 Kneeled down in the dust
 Toiling over a lump of clay
 Till he shaped it in his own image;*

² Genesis 1: 1-2.

*Then into it he blew the breath of life,
And the clay became a living soul.
Amen. Amen.*³

The breath of God was life itself, and apart from it they would die.

So when it came to religion, they would not allow any images to be made of God. How do you make an image of the wind? How do you carve the shape of something that cannot be seen? So the second commandment prohibits any graven images of God. When they built their temple in Jerusalem, in the very center was a room they called the Holy of Holies. And what was in it? There were carvings of two large seraphim, mythical guardian angels with multiple wings. Their wingspan was seven feet, and they were overlaid with gold. The seraphim were placed in the Holy of Holies facing one another with their wings outspread. But God was not in the seraphim.

Where was God? Where was the most sacred recipient of their worship? God was the invisible presence in the air between the wings of the seraphim. So as a young man, Isaiah had a vision of God. *I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty...Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings...And one called to another and said, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."*⁴

³ James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trumbones, Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*.

⁴ Isaiah 6: 1-3.

When an ancient Hebrew poet was thinking of God, he asked:

Where can I go from your RUACH (wind...spirit)? So he imagined the most remote places he could think of: If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. Then he really let his imagination soar: If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea—surely, he must have thought, God’s ruach would not follow me all the way to the edge of the earth, the place in the sea where the sun sets! But he finally concluded: Even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast!⁵

They were so convinced that God’s *ruach*, the wind of God, was inescapable, that one of the later prophets made this daring prediction: *I will pour out my RUACH (my spirit) on all flesh. Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men will see visions. And then these revolutionary words: Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my RUACH.*⁶ EVERYONE will be filled with that invisible, powerful RUACH, not just the prophetic giants of the earth; not just the big-name preachers; not just those with high sounding titles; not just the starched, button-down, rooster-strutting, wing-tipped, Armani-suited types; but all God’s people will have RUACH!

⁵ Psalm 139: 7-10.

⁶ Joel 2: 28-29.

II

That's where Pentecost comes in. What is Pentecost? We know it must have something to do with five! Five times ten = fifty...fifty days after Easter. *Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the house where they were sitting.*⁷

Look who just blew in! It was their old friend, the *RUACH!* That same wind of God that they had read about in the Torah; that same breath of God that the prophets had predicted; that same spirit of God that had warmed the hearts of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. But this time there was something different. This wind was not exclusive! This wind blew on that whole list of inhabitants that the author of this story is so careful to name: *Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs....*⁸

How do we account for such a long and detailed list? Here is how: that list of nationalities reads like a catalogue of the conquered countries that comprised the Roman Empire. All of those conquered people could hear and

⁷ Acts 2: 2.

⁸ Acts 2: 8-11.

feel something big happening in that room. They couldn't see it, but they could feel it. These defeated people, who had experienced the humiliations of a conquered people, their homelands and languages taken away, their national and social identities subsumed by Rome, felt a presence and a power that even Rome could not subdue!

Then we get a story that almost sounds magical: they could all hear in their own languages *about God's deeds of power*, as the text says. Yes, of course, God's deeds! They knew all about Rome's deeds of power. But now they were sensing God's deeds of power! That is the RUACH, the power who just blew in! That wind blew into their hearts and souls in the language they could understand. I don't know how you read this story. You can read it as if it is magical: the disciples miraculously speaking in other known languages.

If that's the way you read it, you may be right. But I am skeptical about reading it as a kind of magical language miracle. I am inclined to read it another way. I am grateful for the free pew and free pulpit enjoyed and maintained by Baptists and Congregationalists and others in the free church tradition. So here is my take on it: I think that the author of this story was saying that God's covenant of love was to be for all the peoples of the earth. I think he was using this story to say that the church is about inclusion, not exclusion. I think he was giving the church divine sanction for multi-lingual,

multi-ethnic, multi-cultural inclusion. I think he was saying that no longer was God's love to be parceled out to a select few, to those who were baptized the right way, to those who used the right words, to those who lived just the right lifestyle, to those who dressed just the right way or lived in just the right places.

Here is a story that stretches out our boundaries and extends our traditions. Here is a story that rejoices in a God who has chosen to speak to us in the deep and many languages of our hearts and not in the uniform monologue of the world marching in lock step with empires and political ideologies and denominational traditions.

III

It is not without reason that some have doubted that this church can experience significant growth. Too set in our ways...too traditional...too formal...too whatever! It can't happen here, some say. The demographics are against us; the trends are against us; our denominational affiliation is against us; our name is against us; our inclusivity is against us...you know those arguments and more.

But let me just point out one thing: everything was against what happened at Pentecost. Everything! Their Treasurer had betrayed their leader, which led to his crucifixion. Some had reported that they had seen

Jesus alive after three days, but then he was gone again. When they gathered in that room about the best thing they could say was *they were all together in one place*.⁹ That's the best thing they could say! Well, we're here.

And then the story says that *suddenly from heaven there came the sound like the rush of a violent wind*. The *RUACH* showed up again! And years later they looked back on that experience and thought, "Look who just blew in!"

⁹ Acts 2: 1.