

Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard
“Change is in the Air”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, May 23, 2021

Psalm 104

*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.
You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,
and plants for people to use,
to bring forth food from the earth,
and wine to gladden the human heart,
oil to make the face shine,
and bread to strengthen the human heart.
The trees of the LORD are watered abundantly,
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.*

*In them the birds build their nests;
the stork has its home in the fir trees.
The high mountains are for the wild goats;
the rocks are a refuge for the coney.
You have made the moon to mark the seasons;
the sun knows its time for setting.
You make darkness, and it is night,
when all the animals of the forest come creeping out.
The young lions roar for their prey,
seeking their food from God.
When the sun rises, they withdraw
and lie down in their dens.
People go out to their work
and to their labour until the evening.
O LORD, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.
Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
creeping things innumerable are there,
living things both small and great.
There go the ships,
and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.
These all look to you
to give them their food in due season;
when you give to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die
and return to their dust.
When you send forth your spirit, they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground.
May the glory of the LORD endure for ever;
may the LORD rejoice in his works—
who looks on the earth and it trembles,
who touches the mountains and they smoke.
I will sing to the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have being.
May my meditation be pleasing to him,
for I rejoice in the LORD.
Let sinners be consumed from the earth,
and let the wicked be no more.
Bless the LORD, O my soul.
Praise the LORD!*

Acts 2:2-21

And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 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—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: 'Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

*"In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.*

*Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.*

*And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.*

*The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.*

Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

I would just take a moment of personal private privilege before I speak. I want to thank you for the blessing of being one of your pastors. As I've said before, every pastor knows whether-- every aware pastor knows [laughter] that he or she has an interim of sorts who becomes woven into the tapestry of a congregation. And it's been an honor and a privilege. I am grateful and touched and moved by the chance to serve among those of you who are present, and those who have gone on to be with God.

There have been moments of sharing milestones and celebrations, the joy of watching your children grow, and the privilege of walking beside you in times of loss and difficult change. I thank you, too, for your welcome and love of my family. Scott has enjoyed so much, including classes in Bible study, music, worship, knowing that our children were in a place that welcomed and loved them, and he served as a driver for Room at the Inn. Our children were blessed with the opportunity of knowing this place as their church family, the power of the work camp experience, and the powerful gift of mentors they met during their confirmation experience. And you've also welcomed Joey and Addie as part of our family, and that means a great deal too.

Thank you also for your kind words. I ask your forgiveness for those things I have done that I should not have done, and the things I left undone that I should have done. And I remind you once again that your staff are amazing people, and I entrust them to you in the days to come. And that's enough for this is worship. And we're here to speak of the word of God. So let us pray.

Gracious God, your spirit speaks to us throughout time and space, leading, guiding, encouraging, and challenging. So be with us now as we remember the gift of your spirit born in celebration this day, and for your word to us. Amen.

Some people have taken to having fun with my Facebook page and posting things that are ministerially related. It might be a suggestion for pumpkin-flavored communion wafers for the fall, or a meme on the discovery of caffeinated coffee that occurred just before the Reformation, to which I growingly replied, "That is why I am calvinated." [laughter] And then one of my favorites, a pastors coffee cup with this saying, "Be careful or you'll end up in one of my sermons." [laughter] And I think you're out there. You did once or twice, didn't you? Yeah, yeah. And this is also my last chance to do that, Alan Ritter and Tom Walsh. So, to you who have posted such memes on my Facebook page most often, now you've made it into one of my sermons. [laughter] But seriously, as I thought about this day, I wrestled with where to go in this sermon. A friend of mine shared that his last sermon was in the form of a letter in the style of Paul with greetings and blessings and tender words of farewell. And it worked for him then and me at another church. But I realized that writing an Epistle to you all would be a love letter of Thanksgiving and memories that would be hard to make short enough to get through in time for lunch, let alone dinner. So, at the end of the day, I decided to go with the Word and to weave some farewell thoughts that are connected with the power of this day in the life of the church.

As Bill said earlier, today is Pentecost, the birthday of the church. And for me, there's always something powerful and comforting about this event because it feels to me like the fulfillment of the passage in the Gospel of John from Chapter 14, the chapter where Jesus talks about leaving and change. "In my father's house are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for you." I've often shared at memorial services when this is read that the disciples do not want to hear that Jesus is leaving. They had been so sure he would be the Messiah they imagined and save the day. But Jesus knows otherwise. Change is coming and not in the ways they had imagined. He offers them words of comfort and promise that while things may change, they will not be left alone. Still, some of the disciples can't believe it. Others are anxious and afraid. They can't imagine what life will be like without Jesus. But we read in the chapters and the passages following Easter, that's what comes to pass. Jesus dies. But they learn that's not the end of the story that he has risen.

Understandably, they struggled to understand this event. And in the lectionary scriptures after the resurrection, we hear about the passages of the road to Aneas, or the times when Jesus appears in locked rooms and on the beach, sharing moments of teaching and conversation and encouragement. He shows them his wounds. He eats with them. He speaks with them. He shares thoughts with them. And then he encourages them to go out into the world. But then things are at a standstill for a bit because I think they're trying to absorb all of this. But the Book of Acts brings us into a new era. It's like a bridge from the Gospels to letters of Paul and other writings from the time of sorrow when they thought all was lost to a time of planning for the future. Last week, we heard about Ascension Sunday, the day when Jesus appeared and shares last words in the disciples' presence before he ascends for the last time. Jesus will no longer be among them, but that's not the end of the story. Now, let's be really clear here. I do not identify myself with Jesus leaving and rising to heaven. But rather, I connect myself with his disciples and the others who traveled together as a band of brothers and sisters, having arrived at a turning point, a moment of change.

Through this story, they are shown it is time to carry on in a new way. It's their time to take it from here. It's their time to go forth and heal and teach and share the good news. And this morning's reading marks that point. The disciples and others who had traveled together as a band of brothers and sisters know that something is different now. Jesus, in the time of the wilderness, or his baptism, or the wedding at Cana were markers for the beginning of Jesus' ministry's time of change, and now it is a time of change for the disciples to take on a new role. And so, it is for me and so it is for you.

The reading takes place in Jerusalem, where Jews have gathered from all over the world, from Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia. And I'm not going to read the other ones because it was hard enough for me to get through them the first time. [laughter] But something odd happens. Winds blow, we are told, and flames dance and if you look at these windows closely, you will see that there are flames in many different panels. Some of them are likely the representation of God and the Holy Spirit. And at that moment, people from various places speak in different languages and somehow, they are able to understand as if it were their own language. It's a moment of shared and deep understanding. Some think that those there are drunk, but Peter tells them no. That while Jesus may have left the earth, the spirit has come and is moving among them, and they are no longer alone, just as Jesus had promised. Some scholars say perhaps this is a resolution of the confusion sown at the Tower of Babel when God brought about different languages to keep them from building a tower to God. So, this may be the moment of reconnection when people from all over could begin to understand one another again. Perhaps this moment is just the push they needed to stop looking up and waiting for Jesus to return. Change has come and they realize now it is up to them to go forth into the world and to share the good news. I can only imagine it was unsettling. After all, they'd been with Jesus for so long. They journeyed, and healed, and broke bread, and listened, and gone with him to many places and witnessed many things. This event shows us, after all the time of grief and then the sudden joy of the resurrection, it's time for them to move on. And at this moment, I think we sense that they have regained the strength and the wisdom they need to journey forth. They feel called, indeed compelled, to go out into the world to share the good news, to heal, and to bring the word to others. Their role in the faith is no longer to be those who surround Jesus but to be the faithful leaders and messengers of Jesus and, while he will no longer be with them, they are not alone. The spirit is with them, and they commit to carrying on the good news into many distant places.

I think in some ways, it's an apt analogy to find us celebrating Pentecost at the same time that many of us are celebrating graduations. The disciples, like students, have completed one part of their education and now it's time for them to go on to the next step or to even go out into the world. They completed a lot of requirements for one part of their lives, and they're prepared to do new things. Some of them had been together for years and may occasionally reconnect along the way. Some may continue to work and share fellowship together. As happens in life, events of change. It won't be like it was today, but it will be a time of new beginnings for, indeed, we find that the disciples go from Jerusalem to Europe, and Asia, and Northern Africa. Peter went to Antioch, and Galatia, and Cappadocia after his conversion in Damascus. Paul moved through Cyprus, and Asia Minor, and Rome, and Greece. Some work together, sharing the good news in Samaria and Thomas went all the way to India and he is buried there. It may have felt odd and different at first, but it was also a time to plan for the future and they remember they are not left alone.

This is true for me and for you. We have shared many things together. Moments of joy at weddings, and the dedication of the renovation, the gift of the organ, the birth of children, the welcome of new members into the church family. And there have been tough times. Sicknesses, deep challenge, the sorrow of the shooting, the events of 9/11, the loss of loved ones. We are all filled with memories and stories, times of rich sharing, and learning, and serving of both tears and laughter. So now is the time to create new chapters for you and for me. You will not be alone. The spirit will be with you. I trust in that. Consider that each time you look at the windows and see the flames, that the spirit is here. It is in the singing of the great hymns and songs of faith here, and in the praise service, and the times you laugh, and reflect, and discern, the spirit will be with you. There are people yet to join, children that have been recently baptized and given promises of sharing the love of God in the days to come. You will await the weddings of your children and in this time with Bill and Bill-- now there's a duo. With Bill and Bill, and Julie and Becky, and Paula and Dee, and Rob and Travis, and others, they will be preparing for the new pastors yet to come. So, we have woven together this part of your tapestry of faith, of worship, of service, of learning, of love. A tapestry of many colors, like the windows, that glow with the depth of color that changes with the light of day and the dark of night. Together, you will weave new images, new possibilities, and new ways of sharing God's love with the world in the name of his son. Of this, I am sure and grateful, and for this, I give thanks to God from whom all our blessings flow, including her [laughter]. Amen.

