

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, May 24, 2026

Friends, I invite you to join me in the spirit of prayer. Let us pray.

Gracious and holy God, fill this space with your presence as you have promised any time that we have gathered. Open our hearts and our ears that we may hear your promises and your challenges that ring across centuries. Prepare us to be your people in this moment and in all moments of our lives. Amen.

As Whitney shared with our children, our text this morning is the Gift of the Holy Spirit from the book of Acts. So, we will be in Acts chapter 2, the first 21 verses. And I invite you to hear these words from the early church.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 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 people 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, "Fellow Jews 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.*

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*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.'

Friends, these are the words of our Lord. Thanks be to God.

If I were to take a moment to ask each of you to describe the Holy Spirit, how would you start? Would it be gentle breezes or maybe the still small voice of God in the whirlwind? Maybe it's a bird on the wing. Perhaps you'd turn back to hymns that you have sung your whole life. Hymns like Spirit of the Living God or Breathe on Me Breath of God or even There's a Sweet Sweet Spirit in this Place. They're very peaceful and comforting. "But suddenly from heaven there came the sound of a rush of violent wind." Now friends, having lived 10 years in tornado country, I know a bit about violent wind. Wind that seeps through cracks you did not know your house had. Wind that screams. Wind that can tear a building to bits in seconds. A force that cannot be contained nor predicted. That sounds a bit more like the wind and spirit that Acts is talking about. Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like a rush of violent wind. Consider the spirit in our scriptures. The breath of creation. The wind that blew over the valley of the dry bones, the violent wind and leaping flames in our text today. And I think that that may be one of the reasons why as Presbyterians, we try and keep the spirit at arms length. We joke about being God's frozen chosen and about doing things decently and in order, but a little bit, somewhere, we're scared of that violent wind, that spirit that's going to move and blow us from place to place when we're gathered. And maybe we should be. The disciples were, because despite the powerful witness of the angels at the Ascension, the early church in our text today is just now getting its feet under itself. They're gathered in that room beginning the work of getting back to business, electing new leadership, listening for God, wondering what is next. Well, God showed up in majestic fashion. The spirit drove them out, blew the doors open, their fears not erased but no longer central. And importantly in our text today, everyone is invited and included. It would have been easy for the disciples just to prophesy in Greek because it was the common language of the Roman Empire, and the gathered crowds would have spoken it. Yet the spirit chose what made

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each of those in the crowd unique—their background, their experiences, their cultures, their language—to reach them. The gathered Medes and Persians remained Medes and Persians. But maybe, just maybe, in this moment, they were no longer strangers in a strange land. Maybe for a moment, they were no longer outsiders. And that moment marks a new day for the people who follow Christ. As Whitney shared, the birth of the church where the grace and redemption and power of God's love are available for all in their own language. The early church is given a purpose and as usual, the spirit gives them a kick in the bottom to get started. They begin in that moment living into the great commission that Jesus gave them, telling the nations and indeed the entire world of the spark that burns in their lives, the spark of God. It's the beginning of a calling, a vocation, and a mission.

And maybe that terrifies us even more, friends, because the truth is that the spirit equips us even as it terrifies us. It has given each of us gifts beyond our imagining and is going to send us to places and things that might very well shake us to our core. Without this movement of God's spirit, we wouldn't be here today. Our life journeys would look different. Without that blistering violent wind of the spirit, we would not have served this community faithfully for over 130 years. We wouldn't have each been brought together in this moment from the disparate places of our lives. We wouldn't continue to gather without that push of the spirit.

And yet, we like to keep the spirit contained to stories like this. Ones that are so very familiar that sometimes we don't hear them anymore. Stories that happened to other people. We're not always so jazzed about the movement of the spirit in our lives and in our community. Now, a number of years ago, I was part of a clergy book group where we read a number of books together, but one of the most contentious ones was actually Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*. We were a group of clergy women, and so we had vastly different responses to that book in 2011, or I believe it was 2012 or 13, but we had some amazing conversation about the question she asks in the very first chapter. “What would you do if you weren't afraid?” In *Lean In*, she shares an excerpt from her commencement speech to Barnard in 2010. Sheryl Sandberg shared this with the graduating class. “You are the promise for a more equal world. So my hope is you will find something that you love and you will do it with gusto. I hope you find true meaning, contentment, and passion in your life. I hope you navigate the difficult times and come out with greater strength and resolve. And I hope that you have the ambition to lean into your career and run the world because the world needs you to change it. So please ask yourself, ‘what would I do if I weren't afraid?’ And then go do it.”

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I believe Pentecost asks us the same questions, friends. What would we do if we weren't afraid? If we weren't worried about membership or money or commitment or a changing culture or the world outside these doors. What would we do if we were blown out by the spirit?

Because that devastating spirit is here in our midst. That spirit that blew the disciples out into the world. The spirit that rolled over creation, the spirit that rested on the prophets is here now with us.

The story of Pentecost is not something that can be relegated to our scripture and something that happened to someone else. It has power for us because even though many of us in this room speak the same language, we speak it differently. We speak it from different backgrounds and with different cultural norms. And that doesn't even bring into account boundaries such as age and race and nationality. What if, like those gathered on Pentecost, we gathered around with all of those in this community, both here in our walls and outside, and we celebrated our diversity, our different languages, the different ways that we view the world. What if we make space for the spirit? What if we create room to be fearful, excited, and open to the movement of God in our individual and in our corporate lives? What if we consider how the spirit may be moving to spend the time to examine where we're comfortable and complacent and maybe where we're nervous and unafraid to go? What if we Presbyterians led with our hearts as much as we lead with our minds?

We might have to let go of a little decency and order a little bit to allow God at work. How would we be changed, friends, if we allowed the spirit to be set loose in our midst? Or more truthfully, if we acknowledge that the spirit was already set loose among us.

I'm not trying to say or imply that the challenges facing the 21st century church just disappear suddenly if we listen to the spirit.

We are anxious, justifiably, about so many things. Our culture is changing. Our world is changing. It is fearful and broken, as our confessions say.

There are wars and rumors of wars. There are death and pain and suffering right on our very doorstep. Right in this very room. Those things don't just magically go away. Nor are we called to pretend that they don't exist.

But our scriptures testify, friends, that more often than not, in the midst of what is broken and healing, in the midst of the cacophony of the world, God has a plan that we are often unaware of.

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And today, just like the disciples in our text, the spirit is after us. After us to bear witness to the God who created heaven and earth, the God who testifies of love that binds us together, the God that calls us to speak for the voices that are ignored and to take stands that may well terrify us. The spirit is after us to get off of our bottoms and be the church, to be God's plan, to stop looking up at heaven and get on the move. That's what the angels say to the disciples at the Ascension. After Jesus has left them and before they gather in this locked room, the angels say, "Why are you standing staring up in heaven? He has told you what to do." And yet the disciples don't get moving. They gather in a room in Jerusalem. And then the spirit descends upon them in flame and wind and makes a spectacle out of them to the point that people think they are drunk in the morning. Blow them out of their comfort zones, the place where they felt familiar, and out into the world.

The question Pentecost raises for us today, friends, is 'are we going to walk voluntarily into the world following the path that God has laid before us? Or is the Holy Spirit going to make spectacles out of us and blow us out forcefully?' Because 'suddenly from heaven there came a sound like a rush of violent wind.' The gift of the spirit that calls us to be the church in all that we say and in all that we do.

May it be so this day and every day. Amen.