

Who Has Seen the Wind?
Pentecost Sunday, June 4, 2017

So much to take in. How to make sense of it all? President Trump's withdrawal of the US from the Paris Climate agreement; investigations into ties with Russia; proposed cuts on funding for Medicaid, food stamps, programs for people with disabilities, and education; renewed attempts to ban people from predominantly Muslim countries; Russia's role in our election and our government; erosion of trust with our allies; the murder of two men and the severe injury to a third who defended two women on a train in Seattle last Saturday, and now last night the attack on London Bridge ... I could go on, but already it's overwhelming. And these are just the events and news of the past week!

What can we do? - beyond coming up with definitions of covfefe, shouting at the tv, laughing ruefully at Randy Rainbow's parodies, or more seriously, sobbing or withdrawing? How are we to respond? Is there anything we can do to shape a society worthy of baby Mae and the rest of our children, of all children? What can we do as people of faith?

For a start, we can go fly a kite.

I don't mean that in the slang connotation of "get out of here." Though I'm sure, like me, there are many people you would like to see go away. I mean literally, as we're going to do this morning [and again at the end of this month]. For a kite reminds us of two truths we need to hold onto in these troubled times – that we are not alone and that we are part of something greater than our individual stories, wishes, successes, and failures.

First, kite flying is not a solitary activity. Yes, you can physically fly a kite all by yourself, but why would you? It helps to have one person to run with the kite to help it catch the wind while the other stands with the string. And even more than the mechanics, what is flying a kite without others to point to it, admire its height, hold their breath when it plunges, clap when it soars, and console when it crashes. Kite flying is communal.

Second, kites are great symbols – of hope, of the importance of roots giving us weight as the tail of kite keeps it paradoxically soaring; and especially of the power of God, of spirit, of Love, of Life – whatever metaphor you use, that is made visible by the invisible wind which lifts and flies the kite. And that wind reminds us too that the same wind lifts all our kites. The same wind blows through each of us equally. A simple kite can soar as well as the most elaborate.

Today in churches of all kinds, Unitarian Universalist, Presbyterian, Methodist, Roman Catholic, people are reminding themselves of the symbolic power of the wind as they retell the story of Pentecost from the book of Acts. The story says that after Jesus' death, his friends and followers were in Jerusalem celebrating Shavuot, a holiday which remembers the giving of the Torah or Jewish Law. The Torah consists of 5 books, so that's a lot of law, but it can be summed up as Rabbi Hillel did, when he was challenged to recite the Torah while standing on one foot: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor." And if that sounds like Jesus' summing up, "love God and love your neighbor as yourself," it's because Hillel was a popular teacher when Jesus was a young man. Anyway, on Shavuot, its traditional to stay up all night studying the Torah and then have a big party to celebrate its gift. So picture, Jesus's friends, who are still mourning his death and the end of his work for justice and freedom and who are still figuring out how if at all they are supposed to carry on that work, they've stayed up all night, immersing themselves in the teachings and their significance and thinking about how their rabbi Jesus interpreted it and lived it. They are exhausted, they are broken open, they are ready to see. And see they do – suddenly, the story says, there was a sound like a blast of wind and it blew through the house where they'd been studying. And then they saw what looked to them like a flame which spread out and divided so that each person was touched by fire. And they began to speak in languages they didn't know and they weren't speaking gobbledygook, but talking about all they had been pondering about the meaning of the Torah, and loving God and your neighbor as yourself, and what that could mean for day to day lives and for the larger society. And all the people who were gathered in Jerusalem from many lands, marveled that they could understand them for everyone had someone he or she could understand whether they were from Egypt, Mesopotamia, Rome, Lybia, or even Asia. It was like Google translate in action! And when asked to explain what had happened, Jesus' friend Peter, who had denied three times that he even knew Jesus to save his own skin, but here he was not only forgiven but filled with God's spirit, Peter explained to everyone that they were living out what the prophet Joel had foretold:

God says:

I will pour out my Spirit on everyone.

Your sons and daughters will proclaim my message;

your young people will see visions,

and your old ones will dream dreams.

In translating their vision of justice equally and universally and in their new courage to live it out, they were embodying the *ruah*, the breath, wind, or creative power of God.

This story is celebrated as the forming of the earliest church from which all other churches descend, and flying kites goes well with its retelling. For the story too tells us that you can't do it by yourself and that when the spirit or the wind blows, it carries you to larger and more connected ways of understanding and of living. The story offers those who tell it a way to put themselves into a larger context – beyond language, beyond nationality, beyond even religion, the spirit blows. And the spirit blew when they were studying the basic teachings of acting with justice – do nothing which will harm your neighbor. So the story tells us that the blowing spirit comes from justice and moves us to justice. It reminds us of the larger story of which we are a part.

Too many today are telling a story which rests on a limited definition of success, success based on amassing resources of money, of power, and success which can only be attained by a few since under this definition success is measured by what others lack. Implicitly, we are being asked to accept this story and to realign our values to it. But this story won't lead to the world we want for our children and all children. We need to hold onto the story of Shavuot, of Pentecost, of the kites, the story of wholeness for all people. This story roots us among the centuries of people who have used their lives for the good of a greater whole. It doesn't promise us a happy ending in our time, but does encourage us now and everyday to speak and act in ways which carry the story into the future. We fly our kites in part so that others may know themselves able to fly their kites.

On an early spring day in 2003 as the US was preparing to invade Iraq, the singer/singwriter Patty Griffin was walking with a friend in a park in Austin, Texas, where she lives. They were talking about the likelihood of war and sharing their fears and anxieties, when they happened upon a huge kite festival. Patty Griffin's friend looked up at the kites and said, 'Wouldn't it be great if we all had kites that we were flying instead of bombs we're dropping or guns we're shooting?' And from that idea and the hope the kites gave her, Patty Griffin wrote "The Kite Song." You can hear her sing it on YouTube, but here are two of the verses:

In the middle of the night
 We try and try with all our mights
 To light a little light down here
 In the middle of the night
 We dream of a million kites

Flying high above
The sadness and the fear

In the middle of the night
The world turns with all its might
A little diamond colored blue
In the middle of the night
We keep sending little kites
Until a little light gets through

For the good of baby Mae and the children of our congregation and for all children of that little diamond colored blue world, let us keep flying our kites, telling our stories, standing our vigils, and speaking truth with love. Let us open our arms to the power of that invisible wind and together let us soar.

- Pamela M. Barz

Reading

Who Has Seen the Wind? by Christina Rossetti

Who has seen the wind?
Neither I nor you:
But when the leaves hang trembling,
The wind is passing through.

Who has seen the wind?
Neither you nor I:
But when the trees bow down their heads,
The wind is passing by.