

**A Sermon from All Saints' Episcopal Church, Briarcliff Manor, New York**  
*Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck, Rector on May 11, 2008 (Pentecost)*

“And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind.” It’s difficult to hear this without thinking about that other violent wind that raced through Myanmar last week. A wind responsible for the deaths of thousands of people and the destruction of entire villages. And it’s difficult to hear this without thinking of that other violent wind that raced through the Gulf Coast of our own country nearly three years ago. Many families are still dealing with having their lives literally blown apart by Katrina’s violent wind and waves.

The Holy Spirit, whose coming we celebrate on this Day of Pentecost, is not a violent wind, of course. The reading from Acts describes it as “a sound *like* the rush of a violent wind.” But with the specter of the recent cyclone hanging over us, wind is a tough metaphor. It speaks to the Spirit’s power but misses its comfort.

The Holy Spirit is the breath of God. A breath that animates us and gives us life; a breath that inspires us with God’s life-giving spirit; a breath that is the source of what makes us live and move and have our being. It is the Holy Spirit that calls us to action as followers of Jesus Christ; it is the Holy Spirit that offers comfort in times of grief and despair; it is the Holy Spirit that beckons us beyond ourselves and our individual and communal comfort zones.

Which is precisely why we don’t quite know what to do with the Holy Spirit. As Episcopalians we like things to be done a certain way. We like our processions and our liturgy and our music to be done “decently and in order,” as Paul writes to the Corinthians. But the Spirit doesn’t always play that game; the Spirit can’t be controlled or put into a nifty little box. And so it makes us a bit nervous. Things might get out of hand. I don’t know that anyone’s going to start speaking in tongues around here – it’s not in the bulletin after all. But with the Holy Spirit anything is possible and that in itself is an important reminder that either in church or in our lives we are not ultimately in control.

We talk a lot about the “power” of the Holy Spirit. In the Creed we proclaim that Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. And Jesus tells the apostles just before he ascends into heaven, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” The Spirit is strong and powerful and beyond human control. And it is into this power of the Holy Spirit that we are baptized. In a few moments we will all renew our baptismal vows, recognizing that this supernatural power is the energy that drives the divine presence in our lives. And with gasoline at \$4 a gallon we need this source of energy. Because the Holy Spirit is the ultimate renewable energy source. It is this same energy and power with which God raised Jesus Christ. And the best part about it? It’s free. Freely given to you and to me.

Here at All Saints’ we, like many Episcopal churches, have a red front door. Now I know most of you don’t actually use the front door. You park in the parking lot and come in through the Parish Hall. And you leave the same way. I’ll never forget my first Sunday here nearly six years ago. I processed out during the last hymn and stood at the back waiting to greet my new flock. And everybody went the other way!

But I mention this because it's time to repaint the front door – it's been about eight years – and so this is on the list for our Spring Work Day next Saturday. As we were discussing this, our Senior Warden asked me if there was a particular color of red we should use. Evidently Benjamin Moore doesn't carry "Episcopal Red." We checked.

But in asking the question, we did get some interesting theories about red doors – none of which had anything to do with Elizabeth Arden. In response to an email, someone on the diocesan staff actually contacted the curator of the medieval department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. We learned that red doors are pretty much unheard of in England so we didn't inherit this out of the Church's Anglican heritage. And we also learned that the practice is not peculiar to the Episcopal Church. It seems to have started in some other churches in the United States and crept across denominational lines.

Many see the red doors as symbolic of the shedding of Christ's blood so that all who come to him through the church will be saved. And in earlier times red doors were symbols of refuge and sanctuary for all who entered. It was understood that a soldier could not pursue an enemy that had passed through the red doors of a church. So over time the red doors came to symbolize not just physical safety but spiritual refuge as well. There's also some anecdotal evidence that churches painted their front doors red when the mortgage was paid off.

Another theory I heard recently was that evangelicals who thought the Episcopal Church *needed* the Holy Spirit would go around splashing red paint on the doors. But I like to think the doors are red because the Holy Spirit dwells within. Not just inside our doors but within our hearts and minds and souls. Only then can a church truly be a place where Christ is encountered and boldly proclaimed by all who enter its doors.

I don't know if the place they met had a red door, but as the disciples gathered in Jerusalem we get a glimpse of the very kingdom of heaven, a vision of God's dream for humanity. Through the gift of language, suddenly all are able to hear and respond to the word of God. The Holy Spirit transcends and breaks down the false barriers that divide us – the barriers of language and race and geography and class and sexuality and age. The Holy Spirit allows us all to speak a common language – the language of God's inclusive love for all people. And this is a radical calling for a world that segregates itself and erects borders to keep one another out. The Spirit huffs and puffs and blows all of this down. The Spirit knocks down the foolishness of humans and what's left is the essence of God's dream for the creation: that we will live in peace and harmony and love and mutual respect with God and one another. That's the power of the Holy Spirit and it is into this divine dream of Pentecost that we are all invited.

Jesus says, follow me and I will make you more than you ever dreamed possible. Follow me and I will show you a life that matters; follow me and enter into a life where death will not conquer; follow me and the dream will become reality. The poet Langston Hughes once wrote, "Hold fast to dreams. For if dreams die, life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly." With God's help we can allow the dream of Pentecost to take flight and soar.