

A Harbor of Arrival or Departure?

Acts 2:1-21

Second Baptist Church, Memphis

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The first verse of the Book of Acts contains the phrase: *All that Jesus began to do.*

There was a little boy who from his home on Brooklyn Heights, New York loved to watch the outgoing ships. One day he heard the famous 19th century preacher Henry Ward Beecher preach on a harbor as a place of refuge into which storm-tossed ships put for safety.

You big chump, the boy said to Mr. Beecher, in strong protest of the image. The boy instantly felt that the great preacher didn't know much about harbors. He heard the preacher pronounce the words, *Safe in the harbor*, and *Home to the harbor at last to rest*. But the boy didn't see the harbor as a place to snuggle down in, a nice little place to come home to at night.

For all the years the boy had carefully watched the ships coming and going from his window, he had viewed the harbor as a restless, heaving and always changing place. It never seemed a place where ships came to dock but always a place from which ships start out – into the storms and the fogs of the seas.

Do you ever think that all the works of Jesus were not an end, but a beginning – *All that Jesus BEGAN to do*. Christianity is not a destination, a point of arrival, but a beginning, a point of departure.

The book of Acts is a picture of the tiny Christian ship beginning to leave the harbor and to take the Gospel on the high seas of life.

Our text today finds the early disciples gathered together in a kind of harbor experience. After the storms of the crucifixion, they had enjoyed forty days with Jesus while he spoke to them about the kingdom of God.

They had harbor expectations. They strengthened the bonds of Christian fellowship. The relationships grew from a few tenuous threads into strong cords. They found their spiritual lives charged with the power of the post-Resurrection presence of Christ.

What a wonderful time it must have been! After all the turmoil of Jesus' trial and crucifixion, he had spent forty days with them. He ate fish and bread with them by the sea. Then, as we talked about last week, as he was ascending into heaven he promised that God would not abandon them but would clothe them with power from on high.

It is no wonder that their dreams were drawn to a vision of an earthly kingdom. They asked Jesus, right before he left them

and went up into heaven, *Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?*

The disciples wanted the harbor to be the destination. Their vision of the future was more of the same. They envisioned Jesus becoming the earthly ruler that so many of them had wanted him to be during his ministry. Now that they knew his power and knew of his Resurrection, they were sure they had *arrived* at the New Jerusalem, and they were ready to tie on to the dock.

But Jesus made clear to them that this harbor was a launching point, not a destination. He said, *You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.* This ship was not designed to sit at anchor, in other words; it was intended for the ends of the earth.

[thanks to Mickey Anders, "A Model for Mothers," sermon preached on May 12, 2002]

Just when they thought they had arrived, just when they thought they had made it through the storm and arrived safely in the port, Pentecost happened. Unexpected. Unanticipated. Wind came out of nowhere, blowing through the place upending everything in its path.

This wind not only upended loose objects. This Holy Spirit wind of God also upended previously settled understandings of

who is in and who is out, who is clean and who is unclean, who is worthy to proclaim the Gospel and who is not.

Because of this Spirit blowing, people from nations who didn't share the same language—some of whom were enemies of each other—began hearing from one another in their own tongues the good news of Christ.

They were united in a way that transcended geography and political alliances and parties. Republicans and Democrats came together. Democrats and Democrats even came together!

Because of this wind of the Spirit, slaves—previously forbidden to speak unless spoken to—boldly proclaimed to their masters the liberating gospel they had received from Jesus.

Because of this wind of the Spirit, women—long denied the right to read and interpret the scriptures in public worship—began to preach and prophesy in such powerful ways that their husbands and sons and fathers could only stare in wonder.

Because of this wind of the Spirit that was blowing ships out of the harbor and not into the harbor, old men who thought their days of dreaming were long gone, young men who thought their lives were already to locked in for any more dreaming, old and young began to dream dreams and see new visions for how their lives might be lived differently for God.

Because of this outwardly blowing wind of the Spirit, people who were not followers of Jesus at all—curious onlookers who had just gathered on the porches of the houses to see what all the ruckus was about—listened to what Peter said and repented of their sins and decided that they too wanted to become disciples of Jesus.

And because of that wind of the Spirit that was blowing people out of the safety and settledness of the harbor, because of that Spirit, everybody in that place who thought they had God all figured out and safely tied up to their neat and orderly docks, found this new wind blowing them in all kinds of new directions, and the harbor became not a harbor of arrival but a harbor of departure.

At Pentecost, there was a wild and unruly wind, and in that wind, God proclaimed: *I am Spirit. I am who I am, and I blow where I will blow. And no one and no thing can limit, contain, control, or predict who I will welcome or where I will show up or what I will turn upside down in this world.*
[Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, “The Wind that Blows the Doors Off, Journal for Preachers, Pentecost 2003]

It’s kind of interesting to try to say something about Mother’s Day today in the context of this sermon about wind and blowing people out of comfort and safety and turning things upside down.

That’s kind of the opposite of how we sometimes think about a mother’s love. A lot of times we think of mothers as tidying up not messing up. When we think about motherly love, we think about a nurturing love that makes a safe place for her children. We might think that at their best, mothers are harbors of safety and comfort in the noisy, chaotic world.

With our family, I like to think that I’m pretty involved in the day to day parenting and care of our children. In fact, since Heidi is not here today, I’ll go ahead and say that we have a partnership in which we share the work and responsibilities 50-50.

But even so, when Ivy has a bad dream in the middle of the night and comes into our room, it is “Mom” that she whispers, and it is “Mom” who gets out of bed and walks with her back to her room and tucks her back into bed.

That reminds of those times when our kids were babies, and some mornings I would wake up and say to Heidi, *Wow, Ivy (or Sam) slept through the night last night! I never heard a thing.* And then I would see the expression on Heidi’s face. And I would say, *I guess it was just me who slept through the night last night. Sorry.*

We think of mothers at their best as nurturers. And we see it in nature.

Think about a mother bird—carefully constructing a nice, warm, safe nest for her babies, weaving together sticks and pieces of string, finding a soft piece of cloth or piece of cotton or lint from the dryer to put in there to make it nice and soft for her babies, protecting them from intruders, scavenging for food and bringing it back to them, being careful not to let them fall out of the nest, making that nest a safe harbor in what is a dangerous world for baby birds.

And there is a sense in which a church plays the same type of role for Christians. A place of refuge, a nurturing place, a safe place, a place to be nourished and to grow, and a place to find peace and to be comforted, an accepting place, a safe harbor in what is a dangerous world.

But you know what else mother birds do besides care for their babies in the nest? When a mother bird knows the time is right, she shoves them out of the nest. Now if the chick doesn't want to get out, the mother bird starts to peck at the talons or the feet of the baby. And it gets to a point where it becomes more painful for the little bird to hold on than to let go.

The mother bird knows there is no danger in making the baby bird do what it was made to do. Birds have feet and they can walk, and birds have talons and they can cling, but walking and clinging was not what they were made to do.

And the mother bird knows that what she has to do is to force her babies to do what they were designed to do, which is fly.

How pathetic would a grown up bird look still clinging to a dead branch.

Pentecost is that time when the Spirit pushes us out of the nest.

The wind of the Spirit of Pentecost is such a strong wind blowing through the church that you have to lash yourself to the pews to stay inside. Sometimes we do that. We would rather stay in the nest.

We would rather stay in the harbor—make it a harbor of destination.

Make the church a place of respite where we can huddle together in the wind with our own kind, huddle together in support and solidarity, bolt the doors and the windows to prevent any troubling changes coming in and blowing us away.

Really, it's only natural that we would long for peace and stability in unsettled times like this, in times of such rapid change. And like a mother, the church does provide nurturing and safety and peace and acceptance and comfort and safe harbor.

But also like a mother, the Spirit of God pushes us out to be who we were called and created to be. So that the harbor becomes not a destination but a launching point. Not a place of arrival but a place of departure. Like a harbor, the church's purpose is not to get those in the harbor comfortable for

permanent residence but to get them ready and prepared to leave the harbor and to sail the vast untamed seas.

The prevailing wind is blowing out—away from the shore. And that wind is the Spirit of God.

And on Pentecost the Spirit of God blew open all the locked doors and bolted windows in the room where those disciples huddled together with their inner circle.

And that Spirit revealed God's desire to create a church that was bigger and broader and more inclusive and more open than anyone in that little room had ever imagined.

And into that room through the doors and windows that the Spirit had blown open came new converts with new and unorthodox ideas.

Into that room blew people that Jesus' disciples would not have thought worthy of carrying on Jesus' mission: women, children, slaves, gentiles from all nations on earth.

[Leonora Tubbs Tisdale]

Into that room blew a mighty wind through which God announced: You haven't seen anything yet. This is a harbor not of arrival but of departure.

Personally, I want to be a part of a church like that. Vibrant, dynamic, flexible.

A church that looks more like the United Nations than like me. A church that is open to God's transforming, upending, renewing winds. A church that doesn't fight the wind to stay in the harbor but a church that sets its sails to capture the wind and lets the wind carry us out into the sea.

Come to think of it, it's a church that looks an awful lot like our worship service today with all of our children: diverse, a little unruly, restless, heaving with activity, always changing, open to and excited about what comes next.

Come, Holy Spirit, fill our sails.