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**“Signs of the Spirit”
A sermon by Mindy Douglas**

**Pentecost (Year A)
June 4, 2017
1 Corinthians 12:3b-13; Acts 2:1-21**

There are times in our lives when we just know that something is about to happen. At a fellowship gathering of the “First Friends” group this spring, a number of folks had gathered outside with our camp chairs and some yummy appetizers when all of the sudden we heard a loud noise like rushing wind that seemed to be filling the tops of the trees. Small leaves and branches started to rain down on us. As the sound grew louder, we began to yell warnings to each other and dash around madly grabbing chairs, belongings, food, and drink and running inside. We knew well what was coming – a torrential rain – and we only had seconds before it hit us. The sound of the rain on the trees in the distance alerted us to the fact that something very big and very wet was about to happen!

My friend and colleague Trace Haythorn tells of a time he and his wife Mary vacationed at a lake in Minnesota. One warm spring day, they walked along a path by the lakeside. As they walked, suddenly they heard a series of loud, strange noises. Creaks and shifts and pops and groans came from the icy water and they couldn’t imagine what it could be. All they knew was that something was about to happen and a split second before it did, they realized what it was – they were hearing the sound of the ice on the lake melting, breaking away, shifting,

changing, moving. A new season had arrived and things could not stay the same anymore.

Alternately, sometimes we know something is about to happen because of the silence that precedes it. Like the calm before the storm, or the way a person holds out their hands and squints up their face to signal that a big sneeze is on the way, or the way a conductor raises his or her baton and pauses in the air, waiting, waiting, an instant before the downbeat, and all who are near lean forward with anticipation because they know that something amazing is about to happen.

The disciples should have known that something was about to happen. After all, they should have gotten used to unexpected happenings by now, don't you think? I mean, with Jesus, every day was a surprise. What will Jesus do today? What rule will he break or challenge? What outcast will he touch or dine with? What miracle will he perform? What new message will he teach? You would have thought that after three years they would have come to expect the unexpected. But his death still surprised them. His resurrection astonished them. Even though he had been telling them all about it, they still weren't ready. They didn't see the signs, didn't know that something was about to happen until it was already upon them. And then Jesus left them. He ascended to be with God and left them to carry on with his ministry of daily surprises. Only they sort of fell back into the status quo. They had meetings, filled Judas' empty spot at the table, and carried on with business as usual. No surprises. When it was fifty days after Easter, they prepared for the Feast of Pentecost. Jews from everywhere came to Jerusalem for this feast. It was like having your town host the Super Bowl, or the Olympics, or Mardi Gras. Suddenly the town was teeming with people from all over the place -

and they were speaking their own languages and living their own culture, but they had come to be in the Holy City to celebrate Pentecost because they were Jews and that was what you did on that day if you were a Jew. Business as usual. Until it wasn't any more.

On the Day of Pentecost the disciples gathered in the room upstairs at the place where they were staying. Jesus had told them to stay in Jerusalem. He had told them that the Holy Spirit would come to them (in the Spirit's own time) and that they would be Jesus' witnesses in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. This is what they had been told. But for now, they were just in a holding pattern. Twelve disciples among one hundred and twenty believers and thousands of visitors in their city, carrying on with things the best they could, trying to act as if nothing had changed.

Until, gathered up in that room together, they hear a noise as loud as a freight train – “the rush of a violent wind,” Luke calls it. And right about the time they realize “something's about to happen!” it does.

The skies open up and all Holy Spirit breaks loose – “Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like a 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.”

It was indeed a day like no other.

The writer Luke tries to put into words what happened on that day – the way all the nations were hearing each other in their own language. The way all of

them had become one as they heard about God's deeds of power. All were amazed and perplexed. Some were skeptical and blamed the chaos on new wine.

But Peter knew better. "They aren't drunk! It's only nine in the morning!" The prophecy of Joel is being fulfilled as the Spirit is poured out on all flesh – sons and daughters, old and young, male and female, slave and free will dream dreams and see visions and speak of it all. And you can bet it was chaotic. But it was also incredible. And powerful. And inclusive. And life-giving. Oh, that every church gathering could be so filled with the Holy Spirit!

From that time on, those surprises that Jesus once brought them became surprises that they themselves participated in. Surprises like when Philip shared the gospel with the hated Samaritans or with a spiritually hungry Ethiopian Eunuch, or surprises like when Peter raised Tabitha from the dead, or when Saul was converted on the road to Damascus, or when Peter was instructed in a dream to include Gentiles in the message of the gospel, and on and on and on. Day after day the people who followed Christ witnessed surprises and experienced community. Day after day, these followers found healing, forgiveness and joy. Day after day the followers of Jesus realized it wasn't that something had happened on that day of Pentecost, rather it was that ever since that day, something was happening in and among them. That something was the Holy Spirit and every day the Spirit enlivened them, inspired them and fired them up for living their own Jesus surprises every day.

But some of us don't want Jesus surprises every day. Some of us want to know what to expect out of the day, want to know what is expected of us. We

want to know what time the alarm clock is going to go off and want to have a clear and concise schedule of the day. This Holy Spirit of Pentecost is much too disruptive.

Beverly Gaventa, New Testament Professor at Princeton, puts it this way, “We want the Spirit to be like airplane coffee, weak but reliable, and administered in small quantities.”

But that’s not the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the wind that moved over the waters of creation and the power that brought life into the belly of a frightened girl named Mary. The Holy Spirit is the wind that rushed through the upper room and the fire that descended and burned the hearts of those. The Spirit is also the calling that comes to you and to me and gives different gifts for ministry to us all. The Spirit who calls us to the table of grace this morning is the same Spirit who calls deacons and elders to serve Christ in this place with energy, imagination, intelligence, love, and vision. The Holy Spirit calls graduates to new work, a new adventure, a new challenge, a new future. The Holy Spirit calls First Presbyterian Church to be a place where transforming ministries happen, where “Jesus surprises” are discovered and nurtured, and where God’s people go out into the world with fire in their hearts and in their bellies – fire that causes us to do outlandish acts of kindness, to live into the ridiculous generosity of ourselves and our resources, and to love with wild abandon and gracious inclusion all of God’s people all around the world. And that’s only the tip of the iceberg of what the Holy Spirit is doing in and among us. Only the tip of the iceberg.

On this Pentecost day, I feel that same way I did when I heard the torrential rain in the distance this spring – like something is about to happen – like something is happening. Could it be the Holy Spirit?

Listen friends. Lean in and listen closely. And be prepared to be surprised.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

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