

Lead, Follow or Get Out of the Way!

Pentecost 2011

No, you won't find that in your Bible. But they are words that come to mind at Pentecost, the spiritual birthday of the church. Lead. Follow. Get out of the way! Christian ministry, like other human social endeavors, demands leadership. The biblical stories of faith feature strong leaders like the Old Testament's Abraham, covenant partner with God; Moses, ancient Israel's liberator from slavery in Egypt and lawgiver among the former slaves in the wilderness; Jesus, the gospels' Abraham and Moses of a new covenant, new liberation and new law; and Paul, New Testament apostle to the Gentiles, missionary and martyr for the young faith. Strong leaders, all.

Leadership has been a popular corporate buzzword in recent years.

Not long ago it was all about management. Managers preside over the status quo. Leaders, like Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, innovate and usher in change, or lead the charge to meet it or resist it. The kingdom of God that Jesus preached gathered up the ancient promises and prophetic visions and shaped them into a hope that transcends them all. It has been said that Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God but what he got instead was the church. That is to say that the church, though a gift of God, is also a human institution that falls well short of the kingdom of God. But both kingdom of God and church need leaders, people who know how to listen and how to respond to God and to help people

recognize in the pillar of fire by night and cloud by day something more than just smoke.

I do not know the author, but this verse appeared in the Wall Street Journal some years ago, probably intended for graduating seniors, and speaks to the issue of leadership and the situation at Pentecost. It is called *Go Fly a Kite*.

People who always run with the crowd get lost in the crowd.

So stand up for what you believe.

Even if you're the only one who believes it.

At meetings, be the first to speak out.

Rather than the last to agree.

Have the guts to admit when you're wrong.

And the grace not to swagger when you're right.

Yes, there might be comfort in numbers.

But people often rise to great heights the same way kites do.

Against the wind. Not with it. [Go fly a kite!]

If you have flown a kite or model airplane or anything else that flies, you know that wind at your back may help you move forward once you are up, but it won't lift you. You take off and you land against the wind, with the wind in your face. Opposition gives lift. Resistance, you weight lifters know, builds strength. Leaders need strength and lift. They know how to fly. Into the wind.

Of course our faith needs followers as well as leaders. Those who stand

out from the crowd must gain some following or they remain isolated prophets, lone rangers. Newt Gingrich can stand on the sidelines and pontificate, but if he has no following, he is just another minority voice. No one would remember Abraham or Sarah if at least some of their offspring had not continued to worship the mysterious God who called them out of Mesopotamia and made promises to them about the land of Canaan. Moses would be no hero if he had only faced Pharaoh in his court or Yahweh God in the burning bush alone and with courage, but with no following. Paul and his letters would have disintegrated and disappeared in the dustbin of history if readers did not continue to find inspiration and motivation there to follow Jesus.

Much Christian preaching falls in this area of calling forth and nurturing a following. Not for the preacher, hopefully, but for the Lord and head of the church, Jesus. Following Jesus is the heart of discipleship. Before we were known as Christians, we were called followers of the Way. Christians are pilgrims, fellow travelers who seek to follow as their Lord the one is the way, the truth and the life. We might associate the first person of the Trinity with leadership for the way. The second person of the Trinity with following in the way. And the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, with getting out of the way.

This third person Holy Spirit is not the exclusive property of the holy rollers. But it is easy to see why we have trouble giving the Holy Spirit anything like equal time. In the Apostels' Creed, for instance, there are

108 words, and 80 of them have to do with the first two persons of the Trinity, Father and Son. When the Holy Spirit does show up, almost as an afterthought, we jump right to the Spirit's creation, the church. The Holy Spirit is a slippery theological challenge. We do not know where, when or how the Spirit will blow. Jesus said as much. Of the three members of the blessed Trinity, the Holy Spirit seems most out of our control. The Holy Spirit, like wind and fire, demands that we get out of the way.

The Pentecost story has the disciples sitting there in Jerusalem, just counting the fifty days since Passover. They were all together, following Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension, just waiting for something to happen. Now what? We have no leader any more. How do we follow? How do we lead? Jesus had said that they should go out to the world with the promise of his continued presence, but they did not know how to get started. They knew they needed to get going. But nobody seemed to be able to take that first step. There they were, all together in one place, waiting for something to happen. A gaping hole, a vast absence, a void had them immobilized. Then God filled in the blanks. A mighty, rushing wind filled the house where they were sitting. (Notice that the text says they were sitting. Not. Not dancing. Not poised for movement. Not doing aerobics or stretches or yoga or pilates. Just sitting. Holy couch potatoes.) A mighty rush of wind filled the house and tongues of fire appeared, with a tongue resting on each one there. They began to

speak in different languages, tongues that lay beyond their ken and kin. All who were there were filled with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit blew life into these disciples and began to transform them from those who sit at the master's feet to apostles, those who are sent in the master's name. Thus the church of Jesus Christ was born. Not at Bethlehem in a manger. Not at the cross or tomb. But in the wind and fire of Pentecost. The creative, re-creative Spirit had her way with these clueless individuals and knit them together into a fellowship, a community on fire for mission. They got out of the way, and the Holy Spirit blew and burned and prevailed.

God the Holy Spirit is out of control, or at least out of our control. But, as we submit to this Spirit, we become church. The Holy Spirit blows in as a wind, falls afresh on us as fire, and wings between heaven and earth like a dove, and we can only get out of the way.

Behind the property of the church I served in Walworth were two undeveloped acres. In 1990, for the centennial of that congregation, we planted this small field in prairie grasses and wildflowers. When it came time for the first controlled burn, it was exciting. The fire department was there. The slight breeze that day was from the south, the right direction to push the flames toward the gravel parking lot rather than toward the church building and neighbors' homes. Once ignited, upwind, that patch of grass was an instant ball of fire that to the opposite corner of the field in a sudden burst and flash. It was all over in just

a few seconds and I thought to myself, “So this is a controlled burn! Imagine an uncontrolled fire!” It just occurs to me now that our two acres here on the top of the hill somehow corresponds to those two acres in Walworth. Part of the attraction to come to this place must have been the challenge to consider with you how to use that undeveloped parcel that respects its donor’s purpose in giving it to us fifty years ago, and yet doesn’t let it just sit idle or go to seed in weeds.

What a gift of the Spirit to imagine it capturing the sun’s rays, not only for our use, but for the use of others.

The Holy Spirit is fire, a basic, natural, ordinary element of this life that can strike fear and awe in our hearts when not contained or controlled.

We think we have fire tamed, as it snaps to life in our kitchen range or living room fireplace, or furnace or engine. But there remains something wild, untamable, out of control, supernatural about fire, nonetheless.

No matter how well we think we have fire contained and controlled it sometimes gets out and takes over, as we are seeing right now in the Southwest.

The Holy Spirit is fire and wind. Wind is also basic, natural and ordinary when contained and controlled, and yet it too is capable of supernatural, extraordinary damage when conditions are right, as we have been seeing in recent storms. The Spirit, or Hebrew *ruach*, of God blew across the primordial waters of chaos in the beginning, as Genesis tells us, and that same Spirit breathed life in the nostrils of Adam. Put wind and

fire together and you have some serious power, capable of creating and destroying whole worlds.

The Holy Spirit is also dove, the gentle, fragile bird and symbol of peace. Noah sent out the dove from the ark to find and return an olive branch, sign that the flood was over and the winds of recreation would once again dry the earth. That same dove descended on Jesus at his baptism, accompanying the voice that claimed him as God's own beloved child. The early church recognized this dove as the Holy Spirit in bodily form.

St Paul's had enjoyed about 170 Pentecosts. The birth of this church may be associated with Jacob Loew and other charter members who gathered right here in 1840; but we go back further. We go back to Jerusalem on that first Pentecost when the elemental winds blew and fires fell and the disciples got up and got out of the way. May we, driven by wind and fire, find ourselves winging the way like a dove, filled with peace and taking our olive branch into that new world which is surely coming. Let us face those coming winds, and let them lift us up and carry us God knows where.