

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander  
The Feast of Pentecost (A) ~ 24 May 2026  
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda  
Acts 2:1-11  
John 20:19-23

### *Attaining Freefall*

The story is told of a young man who was walking down a trail one day when he found an egg that had fallen out of its nest. He recognized it immediately as an eagle, and he quickly spotted a nest way up in the tree overhead – too high for him to return the egg to its home. Not wanting it to get trampled on the trail, he put it in a nearby (much lower) prairie chicken nest, instead.

Eventually, that egg hatched with the prairie chicken brood, imprinted on the mother, and grew up with the rest of the chicks. And all his life that eagle, thinking that he was a prairie chicken, did exactly what prairie chickens do: He scratched in the dirt for seeds and insects. He clucked and cackled. And when he flew, it was only for short periods, staying close to the ground – as prairie chickens do.

A few years later, when the eagle was now an adult, he looked up one day and saw a magnificent bird high above him in the sky, gliding gracefully on the wind. He commented to one of his prairie chicken friends, “What a beautiful bird! What is it?” “Oh, that's an eagle,” the prairie chicken responded. “But don't give that a second thought. You could never be like them.”

So the eagle never did give it another thought. And he lived and died thinking he was a prairie chicken.<sup>1</sup>

I begin with this story because it speaks about potential. This bird was born with all the beauty and splendor and strength of an eagle, yet because he believed himself to be otherwise, his true identity was never realized.

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<sup>1</sup> Ted W. Engstrom, *The Pursuit of Excellence* 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Corporation, 1982), 15-16.

As you might imagine, the legend is often used in the fields of career development and vocational counseling – a sobering reminder of our capacity to limit our vision and our aspirations for ourselves. Simply put, left to our own devices we are what we think we are; we become what we imagine we can become.

But on this Feast of Pentecost, on this “Birthday of the Church,” we hear a very different story. Today we are reminded that God’s vision for us is always bigger, and bolder, and more magnificent than we could ever ask or imagine. This morning, we see the power of the Holy Spirit transforming lives...forever.

We have just heard the Pentecost story in two different, yet complementary, ways:

In the Gospel, from John, the disciples are huddled together in the Upper Room out of fear. (By the way: If this sounds familiar, it’s because we heard this same passage on the Sunday after Easter. The lectionary does that sometimes – usually to emphasize something really important.) Yes, this is really important.

The disciples have seen what happened to Jesus on Good Friday, and they know that Rome is out to persecute them, too. They have every reason to believe that this is how they will live out the rest of their days – even though Jesus promised them something different.

He had told them, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (Jn. 16:13). Or, as we heard last week, “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” (Acts 1:8). Jesus said that they will soar like eagles.

But despite all of this – despite hearing these words from Jesus’ own lips, despite witnessing His resurrection – the disciples are terrified. Paralyzed by fear, believing that who they are now is who they always will be, they huddle together behind closed doors. No doubt they would remain locked up in their “safe” cocoon, unable to witness to all they have heard and seen and experienced firsthand. They would metaphorically scratch in the dirt for seeds and insects, clucking and cackling. They certainly would not fly!

Yet clearly Jesus has other plans for them. Jesus walks through the walls of their fears and meets them exactly where they are, breathing life into them, giving them the gift of the Holy Spirit. This simple, personal, intimate gesture recalls God breathing life into the first man, *adam*, and the Spirit hovering over the waters in Creation.

The Spirit is empowering and emboldening, and we know that they are changed, they are *transformed*. Their lives will never be the same again.

Something similar happens in the Acts of the Apostles, which we reenacted symbolically today. Remember that Pentecost began as a Jewish feast, 50 days after Passover, celebrating the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. So all these folks have come to Jerusalem from the far-flung corners of the Jewish world, from very different regions and cultures, for Pentecost.

I wonder if you noticed how the Acts passage begins: “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And... a sound like the rush of a violent wind... filled the entire *house* where they were sitting” (Acts 2:1-2). A huge crowd gathers, attracted by the noise and fire, and soon everyone is given the gift to hear in his or her own language. Suddenly all the people in this very diverse group understand. This is a beautiful image of healing, of reconciliation, and restoring human separation.

But there is no way this happens in the house; they simply won't fit! As the passage continues after the section we heard today, Peter stands up and addresses the huge throng, so we know they aren't inside anymore. The story starts indoors like John's Gospel, but at some point, it seems as though that violent wind pushes them *out*...into the world.<sup>2</sup>

Let's pay attention to that.

Whether you prefer the John or the Acts version of the Pentecost story really doesn't matter, because in the end the effect is the same: When the Holy Spirit shows up, things change! People change! Whether as a gentle breath of air or a

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<sup>2</sup> Bishop Alan Gates, Pentecost sermon 2020, <https://www.diomass.org/news/reflections/out-house-world-pentecost-day-2020-sermon-bishop-gates>

“great rush of wind” and tongues of fire,” the Spirit creates something out of nothing. The Spirit makes all things new. The Spirit – unpredictable, uncontrollable, all-powerful – gives us the ability to do and to be all that God has created us to be. Even if we’ve tried to stay locked up, safely, the Spirit pushes us out into the world.

Dr. Judy Fentress-Williams, a professor at Virginia Seminary, puts it this way, in her book entitled – appropriately – *Holy Imagination*:

The gift of the Holy Spirit is God’s ongoing presence and power. And...the Spirit empowers and supports [a] newly birthed revolutionary movement.<sup>3</sup>

*This Spirit gives birth to a revolutionary movement.*

That’s God’s vision, God’s “holy imagination,” for us. To take part in a revolutionary movement of healing and reconciliation and understanding. *This* is the work we are given and empowered to do.

If that seems overwhelming, or impossible, at this moment, I get it. I suspect that we all have places in our lives where fear, or lack of imagination, or lack of vision are holding us back. We probably each have walls behind which we hide, simply because it is easier to remain where we are than to risk moving out beyond them. Each of us is on a journey and none of us – not one of us – has “arrived” yet. We all have goals to accomplish, new life to realize. But it so easy, so tempting at times to believe that what we see is all there is...and all there can be.

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<sup>3</sup> Judy Fentress-Williams, *Holy Imagination* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2021), 291.

Friends, **God refuses to leave us there.** God ensures that there is so much more to life than what *we* can ask or imagine. And it's a good thing! Because speaking for myself, my imagination is just not that fertile. I get stuck all the time behind the walls I build with bricks of words:

“I can't.”

“That won't work.”

“We've never done it that way.”

Sound familiar?

But the Holy Spirit, the wind that blows where it will, bursts through those walls down and offers new possibilities...if only I am willing to see and hear them.

Maybe that sounds as though it takes a lot of effort – and maybe you're tired right now. Me too. So I want us to pay attention to something: In both the Acts and the John stories, it is *God* Who does all the work. God is in the violent wind, Jesus breathes on the disciples. And they are “pushed out of the nest,” so to speak, and given the power to do what they have been created and formed to do.

God is *always* starting a revolution, in and through us. We just need to get out of the way of healing and reconciliation and understanding. We need not to be stumbling blocks, or impediments.

That's all. Really.

So, Dear Ones, I began with an eagle and a prairie chicken, and now I end with another bird. I invite you to close your eyes and listen deeply to these words from the poet Denise Levertov:

*As swimmers dare  
to lie face to the sky  
and water bears them,  
as hawks rest upon air  
and air sustains them,*

*so would I learn to attain  
freefall, and float  
into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,  
knowing no effort earns  
that all-surrounding grace.*<sup>4</sup>

On this Pentecost, on this day on which we celebrate a God who creates something out of nothing, a God who walks through walls to give us new life, we are invited to “float into Creator Spirit’s deep embrace.”

What would that feel like?

What would it take to “attain freefall,” understanding that we cannot earn God’s “all-surrounding grace”?

*That, Beloved of God, is revolutionary.*

*Amen.*

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<sup>4</sup> Denise Levertov, “The Avowal,” [https://www.journeywithjesus.net/poemsandprayers/3637-Denise\\_Levertov\\_Avowal](https://www.journeywithjesus.net/poemsandprayers/3637-Denise_Levertov_Avowal)