

When the Wind Blows

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Acts 10

Hurricane Katrina.
Hurricane Rita.
Hurricane Wilma.
Hurricane Alpha.
Hurricane Beta.

The hurricane season of 2005 has given a whole new force to the cliché “the winds of change.” And as I consider today’s passage from the Acts of the Apostles, I cannot help but raise a question, a question I hope we all will consider together today: What will we do? Christians, what will *we* do, when the wind blows?

This summer, I, along with all of you, watched Katrina, Rita, and Wilma grow into mammoth, category-five storms in the Gulf of Mexico. And one of the things that struck me was this: if you were in the path of those storms, you were going to be affected. Whether you were a rich merchant of the French Quarter or the working poor of the Ninth Ward, whether you were a tourist on Cancun or a cattle farmer in Lake Charles, no matter *who* you were, if you were in the path of the storm, if you were standing in the track of the wind, you were going to be affected. And so the question rises: What do you do, when the wind blows?

Sisters and brothers, the testimony of the tenth chapter of Acts is very much like this: When the wind blows, when the spirit of the Triune God starts to move, everyone in its path is going to be affected. And so it is for Cornelius and so it is for Peter.

Cornelius, you recall, is a centurion, a Gentile leader of the 200 to 600 soldiers of the Italian cohort. And Cornelius is stationed by an international empire in a foreign land, on a peacekeeping mission. Who would think that such a man would be affected by the blowing of the Holy Spirit?

And yet, the angel of the Lord appears to Cornelius in a vision. The angel of the Lord called Cornelius by name. The angel of the Lord tells Cornelius that God has heard his Gentile prayers.

And even more scandalously, the Spirit of the Living God begins to blow, and God chooses to blow that Spirit right through the Gentile life of Cornelius and his family. Hear me, Christians: there is no heavenly debate, no litmus test; the Spirit does not wait with decency and order for Peter to stop preaching. The witness of the Acts of the Apostles is this: without so much as an “if you please,” the disruptive wind of the Spirit of God begins to blow – and to blow exactly where it should *not* have been blowing – on the Gentile Cornelius and his whole family.

And meanwhile there is Peter – Simon Peter, leader of the Twelve, the Rock. Remember, friends, who Peter is. Peter is the one who first recognizes that Jesus is the Christ. Peter walks on water; Peter takes the post-resurrection lead; Peter preaches on Pentecost. Peter bears prophetic witness to the leaders of religion of his day, including in the face of torture and jail. Peter with John prays the Holy Spirit into the Samaritans. Peter heals the blind and the lame. Peter, Simon Peter, stands at the very center of the new Christian faith. And Peter as a faithful Christian knows and claims his biblical heritage.

So it is no surprise that, on a rooftop in Joppa, Peter resists a vision that must have seemed to him a test at best and a fight with the very forces of evil at worst. A vessel comes down from heaven full of unclean animals, and a voice says, “Kill and eat.” And Peter is *completely* justified in saying, No. For what Peter knows is that the Bible says,

You shall not bring abomination on yourself by animal or by bird or by anything with which the ground teems, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean. You shall be holy, as I am holy – thus says the Lord.

But when the wind blows, devout, Bible-believing Peter ends up in Caesarea. When the wind blows, Peter who is so careful not to do anything unclean ends up in Cornelius’s house. When the wind blows, Peter finds himself confessing, I truly understand that God shows no partiality. When the wind blows, Peter knocks down the barrier between Cornelius and baptism.

Siblings in Christ, when the wind blows – when the Spirit of the Living God blows – no one, not Cornelius, not even Simon “the Rock” Peter of the Twelve, remains unaffected. And so the question we must ask ourselves today is this: if we truly believe that God comes in three persons, that along with God who creates and Jesus the Christ, a co-equal and important person of God is the transgressive, disruptive, creative Holy Spirit – then what will *we* do, when the wind blows?

Early in the morning after Katrina hit came the sickening news: there had been a breach in the levees. A breach. A hole. A failure of the defenses constructed by human beings to keep out the overwhelming force of the waters that surround New Orleans. Once the levee is breached, nothing can stay the same. The town that we have built with human hands, our town that *we* have made secure, the very identity of our town that we have called home, is irrevocably changed. And what do you do, when the wind blows?

Christians, if we are honest, Acts 10 is a deeply disturbing text. If we are honest, Acts 10 bears witness to the fact that none of our well-constructed defenses is any match for the Spirit of the Living God.

For consider Cornelius again. We know that he is a praying man. We know that he gives of his resources to the community. We know that he has found favor with God. And yet. . . When Peter comes to Cornelius's home, in a complete and total lapse of social graces, Peter goes to great lengths to call Cornelius as common and unclean as the creepy crawly animals that he had seen in his vision on the rooftop in Joppa.

Why is Cornelius unclean? Perhaps it is his lifestyle. Perhaps he is unwilling to give up a love of dried pork, fresh shrimp, and the cheesy, meaty, unkosher foods of Italy. Or perhaps, just perhaps, Cornelius is unwilling to be circumcised. Perhaps, just perhaps, he is unwilling to cut off a part of what makes him a whole being, sexually and socially, among his own people. Perhaps, in the back of Cornelius's mind is that old refrain, "We're here. Un-cut. Get used to it."

It doesn't really matter, finally, why Cornelius was unclean. For the angel of the Lord appears to him. And the wall of the levee starts to crumble. The angel of the Lord calls him by name. And the wall of the levee starts to break. The Spirit of the Living God falls on Cornelius and his entire family. And with the force of a mighty wind, the levees break and the church is changed forever.

Peter's defenses do not fare any better, you know. For although Peter tries hard – so very hard – not to do what the Bible calls abomination. . . the Spirit of the Living God blows and rocks Peter at the very foundation of his faith. For a voice from heaven says to him, "What I have called clean, you must not call unclean." And the levee cracks. Again, the voice declares, "What I have called clean, you must not call unclean." And the levee breaks. A third time the voice says to him, "Peter:

what *I* have called clean –
what *I* have declared *not* to be an abomination –
what *I* have declared to be worthy of the indwelling presence of my Holy and Eternal Spirit –
you may *not* call unclean."

And the levee crumbles; the Gentiles flood in; and the church is changed forever.

And what will *we* do, when there is no more "us" and "them"? What will we do, when there is no more "clean" and "unclean"? What will we do, when the wind blows?

And in the aftermath, in the aftermath, we in the United States looked up and saw that all our fairy tales about being one nation indivisible had blown away in the wind. We saw ourselves as who we really are: divided between the haves and have-nots, divided between the ill and infirm and those who have access to transportation and medical care, divided by race and class, privilege and power in ways we have never dared to examine. . . . Until the winds blow. Until the levees break. Until we are faced again with our own schismatic realities, our own total

depravity, our own need of confession and repentance and grace. Until we finally, honestly answer, Yes. Yes, we *are* our sisters' keeper; we are our brothers' keeper. And we have all failed.

And then we face a choice. Will we return New Orleans to its old, familiar patterns of us and them, black and white, rich and poor, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and straight? Or do we as a church call the nation to recognize that *one* wind blew through us, *one* wind exposed us, *one* wind crumbled our defenses; and in the face of the power of that one wind, who we are with one another must forever change?

To their credit, Cornelius and Peter both change. They both choose to be reformed by the blowing of the Spirit. Cornelius becomes part of the family of God – a whole member, baptized, filled with the Spirit – and ready to be sent. Remember, the only ordination needed in Acts is being filled with the Holy Spirit – thus Stephen, thus Peter, Paul and Barnabas, wherever the Spirit might lead.

And Peter, the Rock? The Acts of the Apostles testifies that Peter became an advocate for the full inclusion of self-affirming, unrepentant, practicing uncircumcised Gentiles into the church of Jesus Christ. *Peter* began to argue that the only criterion for full membership was the presence of the Spirit of the Living God. For Peter, this was Reformation Sunday – a reformation of his understanding of clean and unclean, a reformation of his assertion of what God is able to do: a reformation caused by the transgressive, creative, disruptive, life-giving presence of the power of the Spirit of the Living God.

Christians, this is not some Bible story. The Spirit is blowing, if we will listen. No one in her path will escape, regardless of where they stand or in what pew they sit. The Spirit is blowing to break down our carefully constructed defenses – to force us to reconsider whom we call unclean. For if the Spirit calls them clean, no one – not gays, not lesbians, not bisexuals, not transgendered people, not straight people, not conservative people, not progressive people – not black people, not Latino people, not Asian people, not first-nation people, not immigrant people, not native-born people -- no one, *no one* may we call unclean.

And the witness of history is this: when the Spirit starts to blow, the levees will break. Henry Highland Garnett, a black man ordained in the 19th century in Troy Presbytery, bears witness to this fact. Fifty years of the ordination of women in the Presbyterian Church bear witness. Rosa Parks and Medgar Evers, Harvey Milk and Silvia Rivera, Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu and a cloud of witnesses bear witness to this simple truth. When the Spirit blows, the levees will break.

And then what will we do? Will we still point fingers at those “rigid fundamentalists” or those “unbelieving liberals”? Will we still speak about those “unrepentant self-affirming practicing homosexuals” or the “unchristian forces of the religious right”? Or will we gaze into these waters, these waters of baptism, these waters troubled at the beginning of all creation by the blowing of that same Spirit – and will we see our neighbors, our opponents, ourselves as God sees us – as fully and completely in the image of God?

Christians, the wind is blowing. Blowing through overtures and demonstrations. Blowing through task forces and deliberations. And when the wind blows, and when our defenses fall, and when we finally see each other as we really are – the baptized, beloved of Jesus Christ – what will we do?

What will you do, what will I do. . . when the wind blows?

Amen