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Pentecost – Year B
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Each year in the fall and winter the Santa Ana winds rise from the desert areas north and east of Los Angeles and sweep across the city. They bring not only dust and sand, but anxiety and complaints as well, much as the late spring arrival of high humidity does here. The dry tinderbox conditions they cause can help ignite wildfires. Their power causes large waves to churn in the ocean offshore. They are infamous and dangerous, so much so in fact, that Raymond Chandler once wrote that they “curl your hair and make your nerves jump and your skin itch... Meek little wives feel the edge of the carving knife and study their husbands' necks. Anything can happen.”

I like his concluding sentence, “Anything can happen.” I tell you about the Santa Ana winds because they are the 21st century equivalent of what is being talked about in the lessons we heard read today in both the book of Ezekiel and in the Acts of the Apostles. A frightening wind comes through and anything can happen.

Here is some background. In the book of Ezekiel the writer envisions strong winds sweeping through the desert, picking up soil and sand, moving them around. The original listeners would have been familiar with those hot desert winds, the Santa Anas of their day, and the discomfort that the winds brought. What Ezekiel does is turn discomfort into a chance for rebirth, a chance for something new. The wind is in the process of rebuilding flesh, in a play on the creation story itself, when God takes the soil of the earth and breathes into it and forms humankind. Ezekiel's goal is to tell the people of Israel that as dry and empty as their lives feel after the death of their civilization as they once knew it, a life now as dry as the desert winds, they will be restored, re-created as a people when they recognize God's Spirit in the arrival of those discomforting winds. Anything can happen.

The book of Acts is doing the same thing. Peter stands up and begins quoting another Old Testament prophet: this time, Joel. All that talk of the sun being turned to darkness and the moon to blood is exactly what happens when the strong, dry winds pick up across the desert. All that dirt and dust in the air darkens the sun and turns moonrises and moonsets into starkly vivid, colorful events, as in the moon filtered into the color of blood. Joel knows, and Peter likely knows, that this is the same desert wind that once divided the Red Sea in the exodus tradition, making a new path through which an enslaved people found freedom. They were dead, and then wind came and they found themselves alive. Anything can happen when a fierce, dry wind—when God's Spirit—starts blowing across the face of the earth.

That is as good a symbol of Pentecost as any: a dangerous wind, moving things around, stirring up soil long settled, causing a few wildfires or tongues of flame, re-creating the world from the same old dirt that is now being arranged in new ways, bringing flesh where there was once only dry bone, bringing life where there once was death. Anything can happen.

It was happening for Ezekiel. It was happening for Joel. It was happening for Peter. And it continues to happen for us in the church today. God's Spirit, the wind of God as it were, is going to scare us and discomfort us as it rearranges how we see people and events. God's

Spirit will put flesh and life where we thought no more than dry bones and sand could exist, in the very places where we see no life. God's Spirit might even set some fires inside us that destroy what we have so carefully built and preserved in order that something else might take its place, new paths formed, new ways to escape from old slaveries.

Wind and fire and dry bones. That is indeed a trinity of things that can scare us. More often than not for us they represent destruction and death. But I think what Peter and Ezekiel are telling us is that in the presence of the Spirit of God anything can happen, things long settled moved, flesh put back on that which had been given up for dead. People start to dream rather than despair. Our human tendency is to separate things by condition, including the conditions of race and class and sex, and when living things start being separated, they die. But, as the life of Jesus reminds us, God keeps rebuilding by loving without condition. In the presence of unconditional love, we can find signs of life even in the midst of death on the cross. In the presence of unconditional love, people start hearing good news in ways that we can understand, as we finally realize that all those old conditions by which we reject or accept can be set aside. We begin to see something holy in ordinary human beings. We begin to see Jesus. Relationships form and reconciliation begins. That has always been what the church is about when it is true to the mission to which God has called us: to reconcile people one to another and all of us to God.

Pentecost is a reminder that anything can happen when God's Spirit starts moving among us. We hear in new ways. We speak with new voices. We have a vision of how the world can be a different place than the one with which we are so familiar, a world currently filled with deadly combinations of envy and pride. When these new things start taking place, so many of us will find those old slaveries starting to disappear. At first, it may make our nerves jump and our skin itch because it won't be the way that it has always seemed to be. But if we trust that God's love, God's power, God's Spirit is starting to do a new thing, then anything can happen. Amen.