

*Year B, 2018*  
*Fr. Robert D. Arnold*

*Pentecost*  
*Acts 2:1-21*

✠ In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

The problem with major holy days—Christmas, Easter, Pentecost—is that we become so familiar with the stories and their symbols that we can become numb to their power. We become so comfortable with these beloved events that we miss the elements of these stories meant to move us out of our comfort zones. It's easy for us to reduce Christmas to a baby in a cradle and a lovely Christmas illustration; Easter to decorated eggs and a bunny in a basket; and Pentecost to a party celebrating the birth of the Church. When we go home from these festivals, we are, really, no different than when we came. No violent wind or singeing fire or thousands being baptized. Nobody even thinks we're drunk in spite of the fact that we served wine before noon. And mostly we're okay with that because, let's face it, we really prefer the gentle breeze of the wind blowing where it wills, that Jesus described to Nicodemus or Moses' encounter with the burning bush, as long as we keep a safe distance. Familiarity, even if it doesn't breed contempt, does bring about domestication. And we domesticated Christians prefer to think of the Holy Spirit, not as violent wind and singeing fire, but as the "Comforter" whom Jesus says will never let us go. However, the problem with language is that it changes over time. "Comfort" once had a different meaning.

The Bayeux Tapestry is an embroidery depicting the Battle of Hastings in 1066 in which the Norman armies of William the Conqueror defeated the Anglo-Saxon armies of King Harold II. This tapestry is a unique treasure in all the world—unique in several ways. I'm sure you've seen tapestries before. They are like large rugs that were hung on castle walls to act like insulation against the cold stone. They were woven in such a way as to paint a picture or scene. The Bayeux Tapestry is unique in that it is hand embroidered and it contains many scenes because it is 230 feet long. It is the only remaining pictorial relic that shows what life was like in the 11<sup>th</sup> century—how bishops, kings and peasantry were dressed and armies outfitted; who were the important figures of their day. The embroidery was probably completed by 1077. One of the panels in this massive work shows William on horseback poking the point of his lance in one of his soldier's

behind. The caption underneath reads, “William comforts his soldiers.” Old English intended “comfort” to mean “encourage” or “compel”, which is not a bad translation of the Greek word *paraclete*, which is what we read in the Bible. Greek armies had among them an encourager who at the end of a losing battle would march along with the troops and assure them that they would have another day to fight; losing a battle, he might tell them, doesn’t mean you’ve lost the war. Encouraging. However, it’s not nearly as encouraging as the tip of a lance poking your behind. Jesus promised to ask the Father to send us another “Comforter!”

Every Pentecost we pray “Come, Holy Spirit, come.” Perhaps the image of the tip of a lance encouraging us may cause us to change that prayer. The Holy Spirit can be a gentle breeze as Jesus told Nicodemus, but it can also be a mighty rush of wind and purifying fire. I don’t expect a disturbing wind to bother us today—our windows are all boarded up—so we’re safe! As long as you remember that one of the tasks of the Holy Spirit is to push, poke, pinch, probe and do whatever else is necessary to get us to move off dead center. And I do mean “dead.” The Holy Spirit is the Lord, the Giver of Life. He is an agitator, a provocateur who intends to move us into action and bring for something new. We can’t let our familiarity domesticate the Spirit.

You have chosen a new rector. He will be here soon. I believe, and your Search Committee and Vestry believes the Holy Spirit has had something to do with his selection. You did not hire him; you extended a call and he accepted. But maybe he’s being sent by God—that God has a plan for you and for him. It will be interesting to see how you discern God’s plan together and what tools will be needed to implement that plan. If he pulls out a spear, you’ll know what that’s about: Comfort! All that God does has a purpose.

*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout,  
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;*

*it shall not return to me empty,  
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isa. 55.10-11)*

There are other words that can help us understand the work of the Spirit—Advocate, the One who comes along side us with encouragement; the One who calls Jesus to mind and teaches us all that we need to know to be God’s people; the One who renews the face of the earth; the One who carries our anguish to God “with sighs too deep for words” (as Paul describes in this morning’s Epistle) – but it is the “Comforter” who gets us and the church off dead center and moving toward the Kingdom.

Come, Holy Spirit, come with violent wind and singeing fire and bring forth among us and in us that which You would have us do. Amen.