

Christ Presbyterian Church
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John Mitchell
Elemental: The Wind—Chicken Soup for the CPC Soul | Acts 2

When people find out that you're preaching your first and last sermon at Christ Presbyterian Church, you tend to get some interesting words of encouragement throughout the week. Mike Kennedy, one of our volunteer receptionists who always brings in great treats, asked me this week, "Would you prefer eggs or tomatoes?" It took a while for me to actually sense what he was suggesting, and I said, "Well, why don't we go with eggs because I don't want to frustrate any of the vegetarians in the room if you decide to throw those at me." From Brian Wood I got a message that said, "Mitch, praying for your sermon today. I am sure it will be great. How can a lawyer talking about wind not have a lot to say?" Friends...you can't live without them!

My grandfather was a pastor and unfortunately I was never actually able to hear him preach because he died while my father was in college. As my dad talked about his father, the preacher, and talked about other good messages that he heard from other preachers growing up, he had this test of what a good sermon needed to cover. He said: "The preacher needs to tell the congregation what he's going to tell them, then he needs to tell them, and then he needs to tell them what he told them." I want to try to follow that rubric with you today. I've also learned in my time in leadership at CPC that there's a really common request to share more stories; yours, mine, and ours. Stories about how God is working in the lives of the community, and I want to honor that today in a way that I'm going to close with something called "Chicken Soup for the CPC Soul." I'll tell you right now that I'm not able to get through this message without getting a little bit misty and I suspect many of you will get misty too as some of the stories are shared. If we do it's a sign that the Holy Spirit is alive and working within us and doing exactly what should happen.

We're in the midst of a series called "Elemental: God All Around," and today I get to address how God catches our attention in and through the wind. I have three main themes. The first is one that Rich Phenow talked about a few weeks ago—it is that when God gets our attention we need to pay attention. In some respects, that could be the tagline for this whole series. My second theme is that God and the Holy Spirit use the wind, and when they use the wind, they create movements and set things in motion. I'd like to conclude with probably the greatest movement we will ever be a part of that was set in the motion at Pentecost by the Holy Spirit, and that is the local church. The local church is God's plan A and He doesn't have a plan B—we're plan A.

Let's talk about God getting our attention. If I had to pick a person in the Bible that I could most identify with it's Peter. His intentions were great, he truly loved Jesus and he wanted to follow Him, but often he fell short. Occasionally he rose to greatness with moments of great clarity that moved people around him. Last week if you were paying

attention to Laura Crosby as she was preaching about the story of Jesus and Peter walking on the water, she used an important passage from Matthew. She used it to talk about water, but it's also important as we talk about the role that the wind played in this verse. It says:

And early in the morning, Jesus came walking toward them on the sea, but when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea they were terrified saying, "It's a ghost!" and they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid." ²⁸ Peter answered Him, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." ²⁹⁻³⁰ Jesus said, "Come" so Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water and came toward Jesus, but when he noticed the strong wind he became frightened and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out His hand and caught him saying to him, "Ye of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³² He climbed back into the boat and the wind died down. [Matthew 14:25-32]

Notice the roll of the wind here. It's a distraction. Clearly Jesus had the disciple's attention when He first started walking on the water. You'd think that would be enough to hold their attention. I think if we saw Christ today, we would want to say that we could hold our attention on Him. But the reality is, it can be hard work to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. Can we do a better job of paying attention? I think we can.

On Friday, I was at Creighton University Medical School attending the white coat ceremony for first year medical students. My son-in-law, Johnny, was getting the garment he'd wear throughout medical school. The dean challenged all the new students to develop the practice of reflection each day by taking time in solitude to look back over the day and celebrate what was good, what was learned, and where they were experiencing God. He asked them to do this for three months. What a great idea from someone steeped in the Jesuit tradition who is actually helping them practice this discipline of reflection.

During my time in college at Iowa State a number of years ago, I experienced the wind and God in an intense time of reflection. In March of my junior year, my father was diagnosed with terminal cancer. The disease progressed relatively slowly during the fall and it sped up in the summer, and as I went back to college, it was going fairly fast. The fall of my senior year was also creeping into high gear. I had applied to the University of Minnesota Law School. The job market was finally opening up and I had hardcore pressure put on me by my national fraternity to take a job as a chapter consultant where I would travel the country, living out of my car and visiting chapters to try to help them become stronger fraternities. GE, Proctor and Gamble, and Arthur Anderson all offered jobs, and they were in New York, Kanas City, and Chicago. And, there was a new girlfriend. She was, and still is, beautiful on the inside and out. She had this unusual

name, Quay. She had lost her own mom to cancer when she was a freshman, and somehow this relationship felt really different to me. I went home at Thanksgiving, hoping to talk this all through with my dad, but the cancer was spreading into his brain and he really wasn't himself anymore. We brought hospice into our home and I really didn't know what to expect for the next few weeks as I went back to college to prepare for my finals in December. The day before I was supposed to take my first final, I got a phone call that said, "It's time, you need to get home. The nurses are saying it could be in the next few days." I did the best I could to run around and talk to all my professors. Some I caught at home—this was pre-email and pre-cell phone—and they said, "Go, we'll figure it out when you get back." I was able to spend a few good, hard weeks with my dad as he was in and out of lucidness and in significant pain. He died on Friday, January 1 and the service was the following Tuesday. My memories of that day have mostly faded, but I remember forty fraternity brothers and Quay showing up in full force, and there were a lot of conversations about him not being in pain anymore and being in a better place. I really understood the pain because I had lived with that for the last couple weeks, but understanding the better place was hard; he was gone. I could no longer talk with him.

On Thursday I headed back to school to try and get some studying done before my fraternity brothers arrived. I had these finals to take. It was a cold day in Minnesota and I was a bullet-proof twenty-one year old who didn't bother to check the weather south of the border in Iowa. So I drove south on I-35, got past Mason City, and the wind was blowing with a vengeance. The weather reports said the temperature was 35 below and the wind chill was approaching 60 below. They were closing exit ramps to I-35 and then the radio went out on my car. The winds came and I was blown off the road into a ditch. I couldn't get my car unstuck, and as I tried, I began to panic, thinking *I could die out here*. There was really no one even on the road to see that I was there. I hadn't seen another car in thirty minutes, and just then, coming down the interstate was this big semi, just barely creeping at about five miles an hour, trying not to stop so he could keep his fuel lines open in all probability. I got out of my car, thinking *I got to get in this truck with this guy*, and I ran over, waving my arms through the passenger door and trying to get his attention. I was almost in front of the truck and he didn't stop! I panicked and went back to my car, but then I thought, *I'm going to die out here. I've got to get in that truck*, so I went back and jumped on the sideboards and pounded on the window. He slowed down just a little bit, opened up his door and said, "I can't open that door. The window is frozen shut. You're going to have to come and crawl across me." So I ran in front of this truck that's still slowly moving, and I hop across this big trucker, across the center console and I sit down beside him. My hands were starting to tingle. I didn't have gloves on because they were on the dashboard of my car. Over the next few days, my fingers turned completely black. Basically, I got as far as the Boondocks Truck Stop if any of you have been down in Iowa. Quay and I visited about a week ago, and it looks exactly the same today. I spent the next two days there with the little cash that I had, trying to make a few phone calls. I was hesitant to call my mom to let her know

what had happened. She had just buried my dad and had enough on her mind, but I knew she would be expecting a call to let her know that I had made it back to Iowa State. I needed to let her know that hadn't happened, and I was going to have to figure out a way to call my fraternity brothers and also how to dig my car out.

It was a couple of days before the interstate opened up again and my fraternity brothers could come get me at the Boondocks and help me unbury my car. And those days were a time of intense reflection. There was a high school band that had been stuck there and they were playing polkas in the corner with a tuba, there was a guy who had a massive heart attack and they had to take him out by air ambulance to get him to a hospital in Des Moines, and as I just sat there all by myself, there was a lot of time to think and reflect. God had me where He wanted me, whether I thought it was fair or not, and I remember that prayer was really, really hard. There were no deals to be proposed. My dad was gone and I was alone, or was I? All those questions I had about law school, different jobs, a special gal, and what life looked like for my mom began to come out. I can remember, at times, praying to my dad, *Dad, if you can hear me . . .* and to God, and a time of reflection; a time where hurry and frantic were my mode of operating as a senior in college. God had me in the palm of His hand and a plan emerged—one that brought me back to Minnesota for law school and one that took me close to the woman that I love the most. You can clearly see how God had my attention.

I hope that I never have God grab my attention like that again, and I know that many of you have been through similar experiences. Right now I want to put in a shameless plug for the Global Leadership Summit going on this week at CPC. Quay and I, for twenty years, have been going to the Summit in Chicago. Then, for the last two years, we have hosted it here at CPC. If you want a place where God will speak to you and touch your heart and touch your soul and touch your head, and really pay attention, you have an opportunity to do that this Thursday and Friday.

I'm going to shift to my second theme and it is that God and the Holy Spirit use the wind to set things into motion, to create a movement. I want take us through some verses in the Book of Acts and in Matthew, about the day of Pentecost. So, in Acts we read that when the day of Pentecost came, the apostles were all gathered in one place.

² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from the heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. ⁵ Now they were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. ⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? (we're talking about the disciples) ⁸ Then how is it that each of us

hears them in our native language? ¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” ¹² Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³ Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine. They’re drunk.” [Acts 2:2-13]

Now, to put this in perspective and understand what’s happening at Pentecost for the disciples, you really have to think back to some of the last conversations that they had with Jesus. After Jesus was resurrected, He called the disciples together, and in the Book of Matthew, He said this before He ascended into heaven:

¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you to the very end of the age.” [Matthew 28:18-20]

Surely I am with you to the very end of the age. How is Jesus going to do that? And then in Acts we learn a little bit more about Jesus’ last conversations with the disciples.

⁶ Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are You at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷ He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” [Acts 1:6-8]

He’s telling his disciples they’re going to be making disciples of all nations. So when the wind came down filled with the Holy Spirit, people from all over the earth had gathered and the disciples found themselves able to communicate in all different languages. As hard as it was for people to believe this, the disciples actually knew it was coming. Jesus had helped them prepare for this and figured out a way to do it through the Holy Spirit. So now we go back to the time in Pentecost. Peter enters the story as the disciples are speaking in tongues, and he stands up with the rest of the disciples and he raises his voice and he addresses the crowd:

Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. ¹⁵ These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and

daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. [Acts 2:14-17]

Then he goes on, and this is where Peter is at his best. He's explaining to people what really happened through the life and death of Christ and that they accept Christ.

²² "Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. ²³ This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. ²⁴ But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. [Acts 2:22-24]

See what's on going here? Peter is really at his best. He's preaching the good news. The wind has come down, the Holy Spirit has equipped him, and he knows what he needs to do. People are hearing this and realizing it's time for them to move; time for them to act.

³⁷ And they were cut to the heart and asked Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" ³⁸ And Peter replies, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call." [Acts 2:37-39]

And friends, this is what we call the beginning of the local church. The winds came, the Holy Spirit came, and things were set into motion. Jesus lived a very short time; His ministry was three years. The people who knew Him died off a relatively short period of time after that. God created us, the Holy Spirit redeemed us, Jesus redeemed us and then the Holy Spirit was put into place to sustain us. This is what keeps us alive and thriving and adding to the kingdom daily. While other movements have failed, Christianity continues.

We talk about CPC celebrating our 60th anniversary this fall, but CPC really began at the time of Pentecost, just like churches all across the world. This was the beginning of the church, and as the church formed, what did it look like? The church became God's plan A. And in Acts 42 it says this:

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to

anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. [Acts 2:42-47]

This is often referred to an Acts 2 community or an Acts 2 church. It's God's blueprint for plan A. We're leaning into our Invited Campaign and John started with these verses. It's really what the local church is called to do. It's how we live out the commandments of loving others and loving God, and how we help bring others to Christ by living out the Great Commission.

I want to share two stories of what an Acts 2 church, this church, looks like when it really lives into its calling. I'm going to call this "Chicken Soup for the CPC Soul." Two or three weeks ago, I got a phone call from a guy I've known who has gone to this church since he was three-years-old. I actually had him in second grade Sunday school and helped him get his Bible. I remember the day he got his Bible up here and we went back to the room on the third floor and he went to the Ten Commandments and said, "Can you tell me what sex means?" And I thought, *oh buckets! Sue Payne didn't prepare me for this when it comes to this program.* But he called this week and said, "Johnny, I have a friend who is part of the Karen Community . . ." Many of you know this as the refugee community that often comes from part of the world known as Burma. When he was in college at Bethel, he had a class that required him to spend time in a refugee community in the greater Twin Cities. He connected strongly with the Karen Community and stayed in that community, helping throughout his college years, and still does so today. So he calls me and says, "There's this girl who's incredible. She's been accepted to Bethel and Bethel has done what it can to try to get her scholarship support, but there's not really enough. Her father is concerned about whether or not she can go to a private school." He said, "I went with one of my friends who is also connected to this community to talk with Bethel, and we realized that they have a program through local churches. If a local church contributes \$2,000 toward a scholarship for a student, Bethel will match that. If we could raise the money and distribute it to Bethel through a church, that would help her out; it would be \$4,000 more for her education." This is a no brainer. He said they had already raised the money through a crowd-funding model. They were a couple of 24-year-olds who had reached out to their friends to help this young woman go to school. And I thought about this for a little while, and I remembered the comment about her dad being worried about college, and I realized, it's not just a one year gig, it's a two, and three, and four year deal. I called him back and I said, "Have you thought much about years two, three, or four?" And there was this long silence on the phone and he said, "No, we haven't gotten that far. We figured we'd have to come up with something new a couple of years from now." And I looked down and prayed about this for a bit, and there was a little post-it on my desk that said "granddad." It was a reminder to me that a couple of years ago, there was a grandfather in our congregation who ushered at the 9:30AM service. He had lost his young grandson to a difficult heart condition. At Christmas, near the end of the year, he handed me a check and said, "I

want you and John and the other pastors to put their heads together on this, and I want you to find a way to bless a family with young kids that are in great need. Do whatever you can.” And I remembered that we hadn’t used all that money yet. So I spoke with John—it’s John who really makes the call on this. I explained what was going on, and asked him, “What would you think if we said for years two, three, and four we’d raise a thousand dollars?” And John said, “I’m all over this program.” And so, I talked to this guy and said, “I want to try to help you think through this in the future. Here’s how we may think about years two, three, and four” and he started sobbing. I hadn’t seen him sob before, and I sobbed too. I was touched, just like I am right now. I want to share with you a little bit about this girl who’s going to go to college because the church acted like an Acts 2 church.

I met Kugae in 2012 during the end of her freshman year of high school. We were introduced when I began volunteering with Roseville High School’s Karen Club. From the first day I met her, I knew there was something inherently different about Kugae that set her apart from her peers. While there were many Karen students involved in Roseville’s Karen Club, Kugae drove its movements even as a freshman. She was always seeking out ways to empower her peers, to honor and give back to her community. She eventually became president of the club and grew it to become the largest attended club in the entire high school. But to really get personal and define Kugae, the only word that comes to mind is resilient. She is the youngest of six kids. Her mom and dad separated a few months after she was born and her mother decided not to join them in coming to America. Her father was shot during the Civil War in Burma, and suffered a brain injury that makes daily activities difficult. Most of her older siblings have married and moved away, and Kugae is a huge contributor financially to the family at home. In the spring of 2015, one of Kugae’s older sisters who was twenty became pregnant with triplets. Her sister gave birth over a month early and these triplet boys spent a big chunk of their days in the hospital and eventually in intensive care. Kugae was an absolute warrior at this time. She continued to help with the regular family chores, was a full time student, and was with her sister every step of the way to care for her nephews. Well, on top of that I’ve never heard her complain once.

That’s a story about what happens here out there. I have one more—it’s not quite the same level, but it’s a good one. Many of you may be aware of a guy named Frank Uvodich, he’s the head of our facilities team and we use this story because when it comes to the wind, he is actually very long-winded. He can go on and on and talk a lot, but we have sort of a bromance together. Most days he’s the first person to open up the building at 6:00AM, and on days when I’m here, I’ll walk down to the break room. In our break room, there is a binder that has all of our room set ups for the day—we can have as many as thirty to forty groups at CPC throughout the day, two hundred throughout the week; this building is always open for people that want to use it, for non-profits or other churches or ministries. And Frank sits down with a cup of coffee and he prays

over each of those groups that come in and what happens in their ministry. If he wants to be long-winded, God bless him, because I can't think of a better way to start a day around here.

Now, once or twice a year, those that insure CPC want to come in and do a little check up to talk about how we're doing. They always ask questions like, "What's your risk management strategy look like? What are you trying to do to prevent falls?" And I say, "Well, we have an interesting program for that . . . our head facilities guy starts out each morning praying for every group that comes through here that nothing bad like that will happen." I ask them, "Is that in your booklet, is that in your manual? What else do you want to talk about?" And they usually walk out and say, "Thank you very much."

I love that about this place. I love that about your church. About my church. There are three things I said I wanted to cover with you today. The first is that when God gets your attention, you need to pay attention. I hope that can happen starting today in a time of reflection when you think about what was good, what you learned, where you saw God. For those of you who need a super charge, I hope it happens on Thursday or Friday at the Willow Creek Summit. We talked about the wind and what happened at Pentecost and how God used the elements and the Holy Spirit to set things in motion and to create a movement. The greatest movement we're going to be a part of that we've experienced today is the local church. We get to do this. The stories that I shared are two of many. The best part of this job for me over the last four-and-a-half years are the things that come across my desk and the stories that I hear, and how I get to see how God is working in your lives and working in this community together. It's really yours, mine, and ours because that's what was intended as the Holy Spirit breathes life into the church. I'm grateful for this time with you. I'm grateful for these last four-and-a-half years, and I'm grateful that I'm part of this church going forward. Let me pray.

Father, through Your great love You've created us. Lord Jesus, You came to save us, redeem us. When we were in trouble as we are today through sin and missing things, we found ways, Lord, for Your message and Your life, to follow You and to live a life worthy of Your calling. You sent Your Spirit to be with us today and to sustain us. We're grateful for that—that we're never alone—that You're here as You always will be. In Your name we pray Jesus. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.