Today is Pentecost, that day when we remember how the Spirit literally blew through the lives of the first believers as they gathered together in Jerusalem, moving the disciples from sadness to joy and from survival mode to missionary zeal. According to the book of Acts, the disciples assembled to celebrate Pentecost, one of the three major festivals of the Jewish year. Pentecost celebrated the spring harvest and also marked God’s gift of Torah, the law. What happened in that place is a mystery, but scripture attests that suddenly from above there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind (whoosh!), and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Next, tongues like flames of fire, appeared, divided over each one of them, and they began to speak in other languages. Who knows what really happened?!

It is enough to acknowledge that the disciples had an ecstatic experience, that is, they were so filled with God that the Spirit came flowing out of them. Luke reports that the by-standers were amazed, bewildered, astonished, and perplexed. Many asked, “What does this mean?” while others retorted, “They are drunk as skunks!” Peter jumped up and defended the group, declaring that they were not drunk on wine, but rather intoxicated with the Holy Spirit, recalling the prophecy of Joel, “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh…sons and daughters, young bucks and old geezers, men and women.” This astounding Pentecost event turned fearful disciples into fervent evangelists. Instead of hiding out in that upper room, they were soon high-tailing it to the mission field preaching, teaching, and healing in the name and power of Christ. So pivotal was Pentecost that today it is generally known as the birthday of the church.

In a way it feels strange – to be preaching on a birthday when it is my last Sunday with you, to be focusing on a story of beginnings when we are recognizing an ending of a pastoral relationship. I laughed and lamented with a few colleagues this week, saying that planning this service felt like planning my own funeral. And actually, I do urge people to plan their funerals – to select the hymns and scriptures they would like for their service, and maybe even to ask someone to share a poem, or personal words, what we call “Family Remembrances.” And so, with that mindset, I decided to share this morning some remembrances of our time together as a family of faith, reflecting on how I, and hopefully we, have experienced the winds of the Spirit blowing through our midst, firing us up to witness to the power of God’s love, and astonishing us with sometimes bewildering manifestations of God’s unfathomable grace.

When have I felt God’s Spirit moving among us like a mighty wind or tongues of fire? As I wrote in my letter to the congregation just two months ago, my call to Westminster in 1994 still stands as one of the most powerful experiences of the Holy Spirit in my life. The day I walked into a colleague’s office at Austin Seminary to ask what type of position he thought my experience might serve/match, he turned to his phone,
picked up notes from a call he had that morning, and said, “This position has you written all over it.” Someone from Westminster’s (APNC) Associate Pastor Nominating Committee had been networking with people across the country, including my friend John and soliciting names of possible candidates. What a coincidence! (You may have heard that a coincidence is God’s way of remaining anonymous.)

Though John had immediately thought of me, he had not suggested my name because he thought I would never leave Austin. At least a dozen more coincidences occurred and two months later I was flying home from my initial interview with Westminster, wondering how to tell Keith and the kids that I felt myself being inexplicably drawn to a church in Dela-Where?! In another four months we packed our Chevy Suburban and headed northeast with our three kids pestering, “why are you moving us from the second to largest state to the second to smallest state?!” Do you suppose they were slightly mollified to become residents of the First State!

Over the years people have detected my accent, discovered my Southern roots, and inevitably asked, “What brought you to Delaware from Texas?” I have typically replied, “the church” when in fact, I should have said, “the Holy Spirit” for it surely was none other than a divine forceful wind of change that blew through our lives to cause the great migration north. Moreover, moving our family such a great distance and so far from friends and neighbors, much less grandparents and cousins, could not have happened without the prodding and assurance of the Holy Spirit.

At Pentecost the people could hear and feel the wind, see and smell the fire. The Spirit’s power and presence were overwhelming and experienced in the flesh and in the body of believers. When have you felt God’s Spirit blowing through the church, billowing our sails and bolstering our faith? Perhaps you felt the Spirit’s gust of grace as you met in a small group for Bible study and support, gathered with others for a time of friendship building and faith renewal, planted a garden for Meeting Ground, gutted flooded homes in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, served supper to women at Epiphany House or Saturday breakfast to guests at West Church. Maybe you felt the passionate flames of the Spirit as you helped frame a Habitat House, sang a glorious Cantata in the Choir, taught children about God’s love in Vacation Bible School, or hosted overnight guests for Family Promise. If you have ever attended a Westminster Women’s Retreat, then you know the joyous laughter and incredible warmth the Spirit can produce. If you have had a Stephen Minister, then you have undoubtedly felt the healing salve of the Spirit. I confess that I heard and received the Spirit’s wisdom from the mouths of third graders in Chapel Club, from the questions uttered by confirmation youth, and in visiting with older adults who were homebound.

At various times in our lives as disciples and as a church, the Spirit has changed our course, challenged our assumptions about who belongs to God, and reminded us to cherish each and every day. The Spirit has carried us through crises, sustained us through fear and failures, and revived us with hope. Perhaps the most powerful experience I recall of the Spirit in my 18+ years at Westminster occurred in the wake of the death of Associate Pastor Chad Miller. When Chad and his brother Chris drowned while kayaking on the Brandywine four years ago, our staff and congregation went into shock and felt devastating grief over the deaths of two young men who possessed such faith and promise.

The tragic accident happened on a Tuesday and we held a memorial service for Chad and Chris here in the sanctuary the next Sunday. What happened during those few intermittent days, as well as the months following, was nothing short of a miracle. The church reached out to members of the Miller family in Iowa and New York, and flew them here where many of you hosted them and cared for them in your homes. We gathered our 180° Youth in Rodney Chapel, listened to them, answered questions, shared our feelings, and eventually decided together to move ahead with the mission trip to Guatemala which Chad had planned to lead just weeks later. With presbytery support, staff guidance, and member volunteers, the youth traveled to Guatemala where they put their faith into action, remembering Chad’s encouragements, and feeling his presence. Only God could have
brought us through that, and only God’s Spirit could have given us the strength, comfort, wisdom and inspiration to survive such a tumultuous time with such grace and love.

Just last summer a group from Westminster experienced another reminder of the Spirit’s abiding presence and remarkable power. When some of us traveled to Mozambique to build a church in just 6 weeks, we knew it would be a challenge, but to those of us working the last two weeks the task felt nigh impossible. We became dispirited and deflated. There were not enough hours, not enough crew, not enough energy. Then the winds of God’s Spirit blew through our midst – not a violent wind, but more like a gentle breeze we barely noticed. We were given eyes of faith and hearts of hope. Was that the Holy Spirit that filled the local women as they mixed concrete, lifted trusses, and carried sheets of aluminum roofing? Did God’s Spirit bless us with overcast days for roof installation? Were the children so overflowing with the Spirit’s joy and laughter that it was contagious? Was Gabriel flitting around the sanctuary, laughing and whispering in our ears that Sunday “remember: with God, nothing will be impossible!” Maybe we, like Mary, experienced what it felt like to be overcome with the power of the Most High.

Like its Hebrew and Greek counterparts (ruach and pneuma) the Latin term spiritus also means “breath.” In his gospel, John describes how Jesus breathed on his disciples, and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit” the holy breath of God. John also tells of Jesus teaching that the Spirit abides with us, dwells in us, guides us, comforts us, and empowers us. Just like breath, God inspires us and gives us life in the Spirit. Perhaps my affinity for yoga lies in this powerful metaphor of breath. The practice of yoga uses breath to bring the mind’s awareness to the body. In yoga, every breath becomes a conscious inhalation and exhalation; every breath becomes a prayer and recognition of the constant power and presence of God.

Friends, I thank God for the life in the Spirit we have experienced together, and I leave you with this prayer: may the Spirit dwell in you so richly that you become Pentecostal Presbyterians; that is, people of faith who know God’s abiding presence, who are enlivened by God’s powerful love, and who watch for the miracles of God’s grace each and every day.