

# Are You a Pneumanaut?

Acts 2: 1-21

*Pentecost/ 15<sup>th</sup> May 2005*

We all know what an astronaut is. She explores the stars and planets and looks out with wonder upon the cosmos and says, “I must go there.” An astronaut travels and explores the stars. But a pneumanaut? What is that? This was a new word for me until a few months ago when we started putting together the Confirmation plans for this year’s class. The term was recently coined by Leonard Sweet, a creative theologian and pastor who loves to come up with new words and images that inspire fresh vision for the church of Jesus Christ. I like this term; it works. A pneumanaut is an explorer, too, but one who follows after Jesus Christ and explores the way of the Holy Spirit.

“Pneuma” is the Greek word for “spirit” or “breath” or “air.” Think of pneumonia; same root. Many desk chairs these days are designed with “pneumatic” shocks, as if you’re sitting on air. *Pneuma*-tology is one of my favorite words, it is the study of the Spirit. The *agios pneuma* is the Holy Spirit or Holy Breath of God that is breathed into God’s people at Pentecost. Luke tells us when the Spirit arrived upon scared disciples grieving the loss of their Savior it felt like a violent wind. And with the wind came tongues of fire and with the fire came the gift of tongues, the ability to speak in every conceivable language about the power of God witnessed in the resurrection. Luke, the author of Acts, begins his account in Jerusalem and ends with Paul preaching the gospel in Rome with his sights on points west. Remember where the Gospel of Luke begins? In Bethlehem. Do you see the narrative Luke has crafted for us? Bethlehem to Jerusalem to Rome and the rest of the world. Luke’s narrative pattern is intentional. *God’s good news is not only for one place or one people. It cannot be contained, but moves.* The Spirit is the wind of change that moves God’s people out into the world because everyone needs to hear the good news. That’s why it needs all these languages. For the Spirit will be poured out upon *all* flesh. And when that happens people will have *new* visions, *new* dreams, *new* hopes, *new* wonders, *new* horizons toward which they must travel, toward which they must move, which they must explore. So we might say a pneumanaut is one who looks out with wonder upon the world as Christ sees it and says with the Spirit, “*I must go there.*”

Are you a pneumanaut? Our confirmation class spent the last couple of months exploring their faith, asking questions, wrestling with scripture, stating

what they believe, and are here to confirm their affirmations by joining this church. But they know that while the Christian journey begins in baptism it does not culminate with a confession of faith. Confirmation is not graduation; it is really more of a *commissioning* because, in many ways, the journey is only beginning. They are being sent off on a mission from God. Or, more correctly, they are responding to God's call and claim on their lives and are asked to set their sights on God's vision for their lives and the world. They are here to join us on the journey and we need their help because we all know that none of us have arrived, because we're all, as my grandmother used to say, "getting there." We cannot make it there on our own. In fact, they remind us to pay attention to what God is calling us to do and become. God's Spirit is moving and we are invited to get caught up in the Spirit's movement, to set off on a wondrous journey. Where? We do not know. *We are a people sent because we serve a sending God.*

Last week in adult education we looked at the meaning of Yahweh (YHWH), the name of God, and we came to see that in Hebrew the name is actually a *verb*, not a noun.<sup>1</sup> In fact, there is no account of God in the Bible when God isn't doing something. Actually, we have no knowledge of God apart from God's actions. God is acting, calling, making things happens. As Christians our lives are to reflect such a God, for, I believe, Christians are explorers, not mapmakers.<sup>2</sup> Following Christ is a journey, a high adventure, full of unknowns, maybe some danger, discovering new worlds – exploring forests of forgiveness, plateaus of peace, and mountains of mercy, navigating rivers of righteousness, plumbing the ocean depths of God's love, traveling through galaxies of grace. Are you a pneumanaut?

Two characteristics come to mind. This might help you answer the question. *Curiosity* and *Courage*. A pneumanaut is curious and full of wonder. Wonder, amazement take us from where we are to some other place. And as we go there we are changed – which is why wonder and curiosity are scary because they might lead to a different place that might require change and nobody likes to change. The novelist Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) remembered a time when he was nine years old, in 1868, looking at a map of Africa, putting his finger on the blank spaces of the map that had yet to be explored, marked "UNKNOWN," which, he said, "represented the unsolved mystery of that continent." Conrad said to himself, "with absolute assurance and amazing audacity...: 'When I grow up I shall go

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<sup>1</sup> Hiroshi Obayashi, *Agape and History: A Theological Essay on Historical Consciousness* (Washington, D. C.: University Press of America, 1981), p. 79. "Hayah in Hebrew...always remains a concrete act of being. *Hayah* is exclusively a verb, to be, used only to denote one's act of being." (p. 79)

<sup>2</sup> This was the insight of George Macleod (1895-1991),

there.”<sup>3</sup> Later in life his journey up the Congo River into the heart of darkness was told in a novel that exposed the rest of the world to the horrifying abuses inflicted on blacks in the Belgium Congo, under the reign of King Leopold II (1835-1909) of Belgium.<sup>4</sup> Look at what came from such curiosity. Such wonder and curiosity these days are often associated with scientific discovery, but the same can be true for our lives in the Spirit – *for what is more wondrous than that?* We might call this a Holy Curiosity, inquisitiveness after the movement of God in the world and going to that place with God. Just think of Moses curious about how a bush can burn without burning. God wants us to have a Holy Curiosity, to ask questions, *big questions* like: What is God doing in the world? What is Christ trying to bring to birth in our lives? What new project am I asked to take on? How can I best serve my Lord? Where is God encouraging me to say, “*I shall go there*”?

En-courage-ment. Courage. Courage is needed to ask the questions, the important questions; that’s what the Spirit gives us, too. We might say it requires guts and risk to ask these questions. But courage really has more to do with the heart. The French for heart is *coeur*. Cour-age. Being a pneumanaut requires courage to follow after the desires of the heart. One can spend an entire lifetime asking questions, analyzing and over analyzing something to death. But at some point we need to act, when our feet have to follow our heart. It takes considerable courage to pursue after the Spirit. It requires a heart committed to God, but also a human heart connected to the *heart of God* that contains a cross of suffering love for the world.

This is the way of Christ and everyone who is claimed by his name *reaches* after such a world of redemptive love, *grasps* after the way of healing and salvation, *struggles* to realize a world transfigured by grace. We don’t know what that might look like in our lives or in this day, but we have to step out and pursue it with all our heart – and soul, and mind and strength.

There is a pivotal scene in the *Lord of the Rings* in Rivendell, early on in the story when it becomes clear that in order for Middle Earth to be saved the ring of power has to be carried to and destroyed in the fires of Mount Doom, a dangerous, treacherous journey. Men, hobbits, dwarfs, elves are all fighting about what to do, but Frodo’s (a hobbit) compassion is deep and wide, he steps out, following his heart and says, “*I will go. I will carry [the ring], though I don’t know the way.*”

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Conrad, *A Personal Record* cited in *Heart of Darkness*, Edited with an Introduction by Paul O’Prey (London: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* was first published in 1902.

That's what a pneumanaut says. Though we do not know the way, our hearts lead us and we step out.

There comes a time for action, for Christians to do something. Belief is not enough. We cannot stand in one place and do nothing. We have to move with a spirit of adventure, enticed by the unknown we venture forth – taking a risk, maybe a foolish risk, becoming “fools for Christ.” Our feet follow our hearts and we leap, step out into God's unknown. God wants us to take that risk, to open up ourselves to the wind of the Spirit. Sure, we can play it safe and stay at home. But there's no fun in that. And if we do we'll miss a whole world of experiences of God's love and power. But with a holy curiosity and the Spirit's courage there's no telling the places we'll go or the people we'll meet for the sake of Christ.<sup>5</sup> That's the way to live.

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<sup>5</sup> Allusion to the Dr. Seuss book, *Oh, The Places You'll Go* (Random House, 1990).