About this time two years ago while I was still in Chicago, we celebrated a week-night confirmation. I’d raised up these teenaged confirmands and was spending more mental energy on making sure they were ready than on my other duty: finding acolytes. I needed to find someone to fly the dove kite—much like the one we have here—which not only included the dove on a fifteen-foot telescoping fishing rod, but also abundant streamers that dangled below. The day before the service I asked the mother of a confirmand who has four more children between the ages of six and fifteen if one of her kids could do it. I was very, very surprised when the six-year-old showed up in soccer cleats and an over-sized alb. Little Robbie was overjoyed to be flying the kite in the procession and I just couldn’t send him away. There was just one problem. Or maybe two or three. It took every ounce of his strength to keep that bird in the air, and despite my shortening the telescoping rod to six feet, he was on to me and kept pulling it back out to its full length every time I turned my back. Normally acolytes are encouraged to wave the dove around a bit—Robbie’s dove needed no encouragement—it was everywhere. After the initial procession, I was kind of hoping he would forget to get up for the Gospel. He didn’t. Robbie led the abbreviated parade into the middle of the church, turned around, and held the streamers directly above the flames of the acolytes’ torches. I’m not convinced anyone remembers the Gospel reading from that evening, because all our collective attention was on the dodging, diving dove in a six-year-olds’ hands. Robbie was concentrating so hard, but he was oblivious to the inherent danger and a little out of control. The acolytes made alarmed eye-contact and then carefully slid their torches out of his way. The congregation was in stitches. And to this day the acolyte coach and my dear friend Jim insists, “He was fine. I had my eye on it.”

I love the pageantry of Pentecost. I love the dove kite. I love the streamers. I love the reading in multiple languages. This morning when the youth and children head out to their Pentecost Party, I will love the bubble machine and the music, and the birthday cake, all of which I’ve had a hand in organizing today. But none of that really captures the elemental, primal, creational force of Pentecost. Pentecost, or as modern theologian Nadia Bolz Weber calls it, “Pente-chaos” is wild. Robbie got it right! We, on the other hand, tend to prefer Pentecost celebrations that are neat, orderly, and in control. We strive for our entire lives to be that way. We tend to be put out when they’re not.

But the Holy Spirit shows us otherwise: she was present at Creation, hovering over the water. We see glimpses of her throughout the Old Testament like in Ezekiel today knitting together dry bones and breathing new life on them. She descends on Jesus like a dove. And when she comes to us...she shows up in wind and fire and a new ability to not only speak, but to understand beyond language barriers. And she lights on Peter, who is famous in the gospels for almost always messing things up, and he blossoms into a powerful preacher who declares the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies.

And basically nothing in their lives is neat, orderly, or controlled ever again.
Because of the Holy Spirit, Peter converted 3000 people on the day of Pentecost. Because of the Holy Spirit, Paul reconciled with the apostles despite having sworn to round them all up and prosecute them. Because of the Holy Spirit, we are all here today. But because the apostles followed the Holy Spirit, many of them were beaten, jailed, and eventually killed. The Holy Spirit brings power and truth. She doesn’t seem interested in making life neat, orderly, or controlled. And frankly...that’s terrifying.

We are not the first people to feel this way, though. My favorite teacher, maybe of all time, is Hebrew scholar Vicki Garvey. She is especially good at connecting all the echoes through the Old and New Testaments. “Nothing in here is an accident!” she insists about the bible. So here is my favorite example: Long before Pentecost, during the Exodus, fifty days after the Israelites are delivered out of Egypt, they are camped at the foot of Mount Sinai. They've just received the Ten Commandments for the first time, and God says he’s going to speak to them! There is thunder and lightning and trumpets and smoke rolling down from above and the Israelites turn to Moses and say, “How about you talk to God and tell us what he says? We’re not ready.” This experience of the Israelites became a celebration known as the Festival of Weeks, one of the three big Jewish celebrations for which people make pilgrimage to Jerusalem still today. Now, fast-forward a few thousand years: fifty days after Jesus’ resurrection is Pentecost, which happens during the Festival of Weeks. And so the fact that the Holy Spirit shows up during this Festival when thousands of people are making pilgrimage to Jerusalem is no accident. We hear echoes of this again today in the gospel. Just like the Israelites are terrified and unprepared in Exodus, Jesus turns to his disciples and says, “There is so much more to tell you, and you are not ready.”

Now Pentecost is here. Jesus has ascended into heaven, there are thousands of extra people in Jerusalem, and the disciples have gone back to what seems like the only place they feel safe: alone, together, in an upper room, shutting out a dangerous, disorderly world. And what Jesus told his friends earlier is still true: they are not ready.

But here’s the good news: the Holy Spirit comes, anyway.

Andrew, Peter, James, and John were fishermen and the Holy Spirit turned them into apostles: messengers. Matthew was a tax collector and the Holy Spirit turned him into an apostle: a messenger. Paul was a Pharisee and a few chapters later in Acts, he is going to turn into an apostle: a messenger.

That same Holy Spirit that divided the waters into sea and sky, that descended on Jesus, that transformed the disciples into apostles: messengers, is the same Holy Spirit in which we live and move and have our being.

And sometimes we can be resistant to that, because when we really listen to the Spirit, she can ask us to do things we are not ready to do and we can feel out of control. She can urge us to serve on the altar as a Lay Eucharistic Minister. More, she can get risky and urge us to live through the discomfort of serving dinner to people we don’t know and whom we think might be different from us. She can ask us to open our hearts to foster children long after we thought we were done being parents. She can suggest that we reprioritize how we use our resources.
She convinced me to move here from Chicago! The Holy Spirit reminds us that the Acts of the Apostles has twenty-eight chapters, but that the story told in Acts is very much not over, because it lives on in us: we are the new messengers, the new apostles. Not just the messengers Presiding Bishop Michael Curry and Rector Jeanne Leinbach, but also the apostles sitting in the pews next to you right now. We are about to baptize and seal with the Holy Spirit two perfect babies because they not only belong to our family, they belong to this work. And by and large, we are not ready. But the rest of the good news is that the Holy Spirit equips us for everything she asks us to do.

So what is our message? It comes from another echo through the Old and New Testaments: before the disciples became apostles and before the Israelites weren’t ready to hear from God on Mount Sinai, there was the tower of Babel. Right in the middle of resettling the world after the great flood, this new civilization with language and traditions and tribe all in common came together and said, “It’s better for us to be together than apart, let’s build a tower to the sky where we can all live.” But God said, “It’s not quite time for that, yet,” and confused their languages and scattered them all over the earth to become new peoples and new civilizations. Our message is that at Pentecost the Spirit reunited us. It wasn’t quite time yet at Babel, but it is time now. Our diversity doesn’t separate us, it makes our world rich, and it is our life’s work to knit us back together through the power of the Spirit because we know we are still one tribe.

When I watch Donald Glover’s new music video “This is America”—a biting criticism of our present culture—or see the students who survived the shooting in Parkland send condolences to the students of Santa Fe, or read about dozens of Palestinians killed by Israeli Border Police in Gaza, or even serve dinner at St. Luke’s on the near west side, that work starts to seem insurmountable. But I have to believe that the same Spirit who inspired French monks in Taizé to care for both Jewish refugees and German POWs, the same Spirit who helps divorced spouses co-parent successfully, the same Spirit who knit together dry bones and brought them to life, and the same Spirit who transformed Peter from a mess-up to the rock of the church, is the same Spirit who can bring peace where we think it can’t exist. And she brings it through us.

The work is humbling and hard and not at all neat, orderly, or controlled. But it’s worth doing, and more importantly: it’s our call.

That same Robbie who almost lit the dove kite on fire, looked up at me right as that confirmation service was starting. Everyone was in line from crucifer to bishop and the organ voluntary was drawing to a close. He said,

“Hey, why do we have this dove kite, anyway?”

And as the procession started to move away, I hurriedly whispered, “It’s the Holy Spirit!” Robbie’s neck craned around so he could gape at me and he called back, eyes huge, mouth open, completely unprepared and a little terrified, “I’M HOLDING THE HOLY SPIRIT?!?!”

And I think that reaction is just about right.