

“Breath of Life”

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Genesis 2:4b-8 John 20:19-23

Do you ever forget to breathe? Sometimes people will hold their breath without knowing it, when they exert themselves. But most of the time, thankfully, we breathe without thinking.

Pay attention to your breath for a minute. (pause) Now take one long, slow breath in. And breathe out. Do it again. Now I want you to try doing something with your arms when you breathe in, if you can. Now, I know most of you are Presbyterian, and many of you were taught to sit still in church. But you don't have to move your whole body. Just your arms a little bit. If that's too much, just your hands. Don't look at anyone else, and they won't look at you. How can you move your body to be in rhythm with your breath? Breathe in. Breathe out. Do you raise your arms up? Open them? Make a gathering motion? Breathe in. Breathe out.

Breathing is a powerful metaphor for the spirit. When you breathe in, you breathe in life, God, the spirit. And you expand. When you breathe out, you contract. But you also are giving out, of yourself, of God, of the spirit to the world.

Maurice read from the gospel of John this morning, when Jesus breathed on the disciples and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” According to John, this happened on the first day of the week, the same day Jesus was raised from the dead and had appeared to Mary in the garden. Now it was evening and the disciples had locked themselves into a house for protection, afraid that the same people who killed Jesus would come after them. But Jesus entered the house and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” And it says he breathed on them and said “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

This is a very different story from the one we usually associate with Pentecost, the story several people read from Acts at the beginning of the service today. In that one, it was 50 days later when a large group of disciples had gathered on the Jewish holiday of Pentecost. There was a loud noise like the rush of a mighty wind. Tongues like fire were hovering over everyone, and people were speaking in all different languages of the world, while a whole crowd of bewildered people looked on in amazement, wondering if these disciples were drunk.

So what really happened? What's the real story of the coming of the Holy Spirit? Was it an intimate exchange behind locked doors? Or a large raucous gathering 50 days later? People who read the Bible literally say both events happened exactly as they were written; the Holy Spirit must have come in two steps, first quietly to a small group of disciples, and then in fullness with the gift of speaking in tongues. Pentecostals make sense of the two different stories that way.

But maybe these are just two different ways of explaining the same thing, that is, that after Jesus died, the believers experienced the presence and power of the Spirit. John writes the Holy Spirit came directly from Jesus as soon as he rose from the dead. And John connects this with the creation story Jane read from Genesis 2 this morning. When God created the first human, God breathed into him the breath of life, and he became a living being. And now Jesus was breathing the breath of *new life* into the disciples.

But in Acts, the coming of the Holy Spirit is described as a miraculous and global event. Acts connects the Holy Spirit to the story of the Tower of Babel from Genesis 11. In Genesis, the people originally had one language, and God confused their languages and scattered them over the face of the earth. In Acts there were many languages, but by the Spirit, people from all over the world were brought together and could understand each other.

No matter how we explain it, the point is, after Jesus died, the disciples received courage and power to carry on Jesus' mission to the world. And they felt Jesus was still with them. The authors of John and Acts may make sense of it in different ways, but they both want to make sure we understand that the Spirit is alive on the earth, and that we are called to carry on Christ's mission with power.

And what is that mission? According to John it has to do with forgiveness. When Jesus said "Peace be with you," he also said, "As (God) has sent me, so I send you." And then he said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Now I don't want to get bogged down in a long explanation of what it means to retain sins. Basically, Jesus was giving the disciples the power to lead and to bring order to the Christian community. When Jesus walked this earth, he offered forgiveness to all kinds of people he met. But he held back forgiveness from people who were self-righteous, who thought they were better than everyone else, and didn't even want to be forgiven. He called the scribes and Pharisees "blind guides" and said, Woe to you hypocrites! For you tithe your little spices, but neglect what is most important in the law: justice, mercy and faith (Matt. 23:23). Jesus was clear about what kinds of attitudes and actions were acceptable to God. But he was leaving, and the world would keep changing. So the disciples would have to define what is good and right and acceptable for each new situation they faced.

The world is still changing. And we in the church still have that responsibility and power. It's an awesome responsibility that we need to use wisely. What kind of behaviors will we accept today? What kind of behaviors will we condemn? Will we focus on sex and ignore greed? Will we condemn gluttony, but look the other way when a husband beats his wife? And what about civilian casualties of war? What about pollution? Jesus has given the Christian community the power to forgive. How have we used that power? Who have we chosen to forgive?

This morning I have invited the Rev. Mieke Vandersall to speak with us. Mieke is the director of Presbyterian Welcome, a Presbyterian group based in New York City that works to reverse the negative messages the Christian church has given to lesbian women, gay men, bisexual, transgender and other people. According to Presbyterian Welcome, 68% of LGBTQ youth receive negative messages from religious leaders more than any other source. The church has done a lot of damage to people who are already vulnerable. But it doesn't have to be that way. Jesus has breathed on us the breath of new life. And with that breath comes the power to forgive and to declare God's welcome. And we all need to be forgiven, not for our sexual orientation or gender identity, because those are given to us by God, but for our failure to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8).

When the Spirit came to the disciples in the story of Acts, they all began to speak in different languages. Why didn't the Spirit lead them all to speak the one language the visitors to Jerusalem would all understand, that is, Greek? Instead they spoke in all different languages of the world, affirming people's individual identities. God doesn't want us to all be the same. God delights in our differences and gives us the power to understand and forgive each other.

So on this great day of Pentecost, may we breathe in the peace and power of the Spirit, and breathe out forgiveness and love. And don't be afraid to move your body a little, as we celebrate the coming the Holy Spirit and the birthday of the church. In Jesus' name. Amen.