

## **The Day of Pentecost (A)**

### ***God's Breath***

#### **Acts 2: 1-21 & John 20: 19-23**

And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Luke portrays a dramatic spectacle – a divine invasion as the Holy Spirit breaks into people's lives. When Peter addresses the crowd, he adds to the drama by quoting the prophet Joel describing the last days, when the world as people know it, will end and something new will begin. It's fiery, energetic stuff. Something awesome and powerful has begun. Things will never be the same again.

It may be like that for us, and from time to time we need our lives disrupted by God's Spirit. We can forget that we're forever being called on to something new and different. Wind and fire are untameable forces, reminding us that we can't tame the Holy Spirit. These first disciples experienced the Spirit as a bright, living force, which enabled them to do amazing things.

You may have experienced the bright intoxicating energy of the Spirit, though my experience is that the Spirit usually works in quiet ways, transforming people's lives without a lot of noise or drama. But neither way is more 'right' as God relates to each of us uniquely.

Contrast Luke's description with that of John. If Luke's account is hot and dramatic, John's is cool and gentle.

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "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."

There's no rushing wind, no tongues of fire, no foreign languages. Jesus speaks his peace and then simply breathes on the disciples. The two accounts, separated by 50 days, are so different that some have tried to reconcile them by describing John's account as a pre-Pentecost event. But I think we simply let them stand for what they are: different accounts of the giving of the Spirit. It's a matter of allowing John to be John, and Luke to be Luke. And it's the same with us. We all experience the Spirit in different ways at different times in our lives. It's a mistake to stereotype spiritual experiences. How we encounter God is as unique as our relationship to God. What we have here are complementary descriptions of the Spirit's coming, revealing the richness of the different ways we may experience God.

John tells us how Jesus 'breathed on them' and said, 'receive the Holy Spirit.' It's an echo of how God breathed into Adam, the human one, and Adam became a living being – birthed by the kiss of divine breath. Jesus is breathing his life-breath, the very breath of God on them. It's a very intimate image. And this is what God would do for us – imparting the divine life-breath – transforming and renewing, healing, and restoring.

The Spirit of God is like our breath, but even more intimate. We're often not aware of the Spirit, but without it we can't live our lives as Christians. It's the Spirit of God who prays in us, and who brings to life within us the fruits of love, forgiveness, kindness, goodness, gentleness, peace, and joy.

John's description reminds me of a method I've found helpful when I pray or meditate, or simply want to still myself. I become conscious of my breathing. I then gradually slow my breathing. As I do so, I take deeper and deeper breaths, and each breath becomes a breathing in of God's life-breath, and slowly it permeates every part of me:

Breathe on me, breath of God:  
fill me with life anew...

This recalls how a wind from God hovered over the chaos at creation, and gave it shape and order. Wind, spirit, breath – they're all the same word in Hebrew and Greek, and it's this Spirit, the life-breath of God, that hovers over the chaos of our lives and brings peace, creating something new – renewing, transforming, resurrecting.

In John's account the Spirit is given on the evening of Easter Day as the disciples are gathered behind locked doors. John is connecting the resurrection and the Spirit. The life-breath breathed into us is the same life that raised Jesus from the dead – the life that brings resurrection and hope to the many deaths, small and great, we experience in life. The room in which the disciples gathered that night was locked because of their fear, and it's into that atmosphere that Jesus walks and brings with him the word of peace and the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is how God often comes to us. God meets us in our fears and bewilderment, coming to us when things are scary, when we've barricaded ourselves against life. It's into these places and times – when we've locked the doors so as to hide from our shame and guilt, our anxiety and hurt – that the Spirit comes to us and tenderly breathes into us the life-giving, peace-giving, renewing, resurrecting presence of God.

John links the gift of the Spirit with forgiveness of sins. What is the forgiveness of sins, but the healing of the past which so often prevents us from living fully in the present, and rejoicing with hope for the future? The Spirit comes to heal and restore us. And receiving the Spirit, as we have at our baptism, gives us the power to carry on this work of healing through forgiveness and reconciliation.

Like Luke, John makes it clear that the Spirit is given, not so that we can stay where we are, but to go out and be Christ to others. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Later in Acts, Luke describes the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Jesus, because the early Christians soon discovered that the Spirit enabled them to be Jesus for others. C. S. Lewis said, 'Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else.' We can't achieve that by ourselves, but only by allowing the Spirit to breathe the life and character of Jesus into us – gradually transforming us so that we reflect Jesus.

Today marks the end of Easter season. However, the life and the power of Easter continues as God continues to breathe life into us and invites us to share that life, enabling us to be Jesus to others.

Living God, eternal Holy Spirit,  
fall afresh on us.

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