

Sermon for the Day of Pentecost, May 31, 2020

When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place. 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.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs-- in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

*'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.' " **Acts 2:1-21***

*When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 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." **John 20:19-23***

A group of us are meeting each Thursday evening on Zoom for Bible study. We are reading the Acts of the Apostles and it's so filled with the Holy Spirit that it's going to take us a lot longer than we thought to study this text. The book of Acts is the continuing story of the followers of Jesus, a story that priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor likes to think of as the gospel of the Holy Spirit.

When the Holy Spirit shows up, things can get very exciting and unpredictable. In the Acts of the Apostles, when the Spirit arrived there was a sound like the rush of a violent wind, tongues as of fire appeared and rested on the disciples, and they began to speak in many languages. When we read in scripture about this sort of chaotic lack of decorum, it tends to make us nervous, or even fearful, so we come up with all sorts of excuses about why this was a one-time strange occurrence in the first century. In fact, the scoffers who were there that day were sure the disciples were drunk, first thing in the morning. Because it was easier to believe that than to believe what no one could explain.

The Holy Spirit doesn't always show up in this powerful and obvious way. In the Gospel reading from John, the Holy Spirit is quiet, not at all obvious. Jesus walks through locked doors, breathes on his disciples, and they receive the Holy Spirit. There is no wind, no fire, no proclaiming in many languages. Here, Jesus is meeting the disciples exactly where they are. And where they are, is breathless and afraid. They have had the wind knocked out of them by the brutal execution of their beloved Teacher just days before. They know the shallow breathing of panic, as they huddle together in a locked room, not knowing where to turn or what comes next. And then, Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into them.

This year our Pentecost might seem more like the one described in John. We are all locked inside our homes. The world outside is uncertain, as we do all we can to stay safe from a virus that will take our breath away. Each of us has our own fears, anxieties, shortfalls and failures. We might fear that our faith will falter because we cannot physically gather together in worship.

What if God has been preparing us for this exact moment? What if that is the beautiful work of the Spirit – to gather us together in Spirit when we cannot be together physically? What if this experience is preparing the Church to be the Church beyond the walls of our buildings?

The first century followers of Jesus, as our Bible study group is learning, experienced the very presence of God and Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. They discovered abilities within themselves they never knew they had. Despite the persecution that scattered them out into regions far from the temple in Jerusalem, they continued to walk in the way of Jesus, sustained by the Holy Spirit. In fact, being scattered out in the world is what spread the Gospel!

Do we still believe in a God who walks through closed doors and breathes peace and creates rushing winds and sets our heads on fire? Do we still believe in a God who has the power to transform us, both individually and as the Church, even when we cannot physically gather? Are we ready for the breath of God to change our lives?

Come, Holy Spirit! Rush over us and bring us fresh air and needed change. The Spirit can fill a heart or fill a room. It can appear as tongues of fire, giving us the courage to proclaim the gospel in new ways and in new places, and it can create soft breezes of wisdom and understanding to help us really hear what others are saying, to really listen with compassion when we hear the Spirit speaking through that person who lives and thinks very differently than we do. The Spirit can bring motivation when we are afraid to try something new, or peace and comfort when we lose that which we were certain we could not live without.

The ever-present Spirit is here, just waiting for us to notice her, to let her blow through here and wake us up. Will we follow the Spirit's lead out into the world to proclaim the Gospel, and to be the hands and feet of Jesus?

Come, Holy Spirit!