

Pentecost – Year A - 2020

As is my habit, I looked at or listened to several commentaries and homilies on today's readings. One woman told the story of her attempt to explain the feast of Pentecost to a group of preschoolers in Sunday School. She told them about the disciples being gathered together and tongues of fire coming onto their heads. She told them it was the birthday of the church – and then they sang happy birthday, blew out candles on a cake and ate it. She thought it had gone well, until a parent called later asking exactly *WHAT* she had said. When the teacher explained her lesson, the mother said, “Oh, I understand better now. Pentecost does sound a little like Christmas. Johnny came home and said you told them that Santa Claus was coming on his birthday and was going to set everyone's head on fire!”

There were two problems with my approach this week, however. The first is that all these sermons and commentaries were probably written weeks or months ago. Some writers knew nothing of COVID-19 as they were musing over the scriptures... and none of them knew about George Floyd.

The second problem has to do with that “birthday of the church” thing. Birthdays celebrate something that happened in the past – the day someone entered this world, or, in this case, the day the church began. It's nice to have a certain day we set aside to celebrate someone or something. In the case of the coming of the Holy Spirit and the “birth of the church,” however, we don't even have agreement in the scriptures about when or how that Holy Spirit was given to the disciples. In the account from the Acts of the Apostles, the coming of the Holy Spirit happened on the Jewish feast of Pentecost – part of the Feast of Weeks – 50 days after Passover. But in John's account, which we heard this morning, *Jesus breathes* the spirit on the disciples when he appears to them on the evening of Easter. What are we to do with that inconsistency? Which is true? Remember last Sunday's story about God speaking in metaphor? Each account of God pouring out God's spirit – has truth to tell us – even the account from the Hebrew scriptures from the Book of Numbers.

The Hebrew title for the book of Numbers is “In the Wilderness” – and that certainly seems relevant for us today. The Hebrews are in those years between being freed from bondage in Egypt and arriving in the promised land. There, in the wilderness, God pours out God's spirit on the elders that came to the tent as Moses told them to do – but God also pours out the Spirit on Eldad and Medad – who stayed in the camp. They were *outside* the boundaries Moses drew – by setting the “tent” as the place they were to gather. Yet the spirit of God came upon them, also.

The important truth for us to see here is that God's spirit cannot and will not be contained by the boundaries we set up. As Jesus says to Nicodemus, "The wind blows wherever it will. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

That *wind* – blowing wherever it wills – shows up mightily in the version of Pentecost that we heard in Acts. That wind of the Spirit was powerful enough to shake things up. The spirit gave the disciples the courage and ability to go outside themselves, to speak in a language that the 'foreigners' could understand and recognize and feel at home with. The truth for us here is that the Spirit sends us outside our comfort zones – outside our own boundaries – to speak the language of others. And the spirit, if we are open to it, will teach us to understand the language of others. Those tongues of fire energize us to recognize God's presence in the diversity of the world in which we live.

And then we come to John's account of Pentecost – where we have no fire, no wind. Ah, but there – there we have *breath*. "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. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

The word used to describe Jesus breathing on the disciples in this passage, according to Scripture scholar Sandra Schneiders, is used only two other times in Scripture: To describe God breathing life into creation, and to describe God's breathing new life into the dry bones in Ezekiel's vision. And this special description of Jesus breathing on the disciples would not have been lost to the first hearers of John's gospel. Jesus is breathing the very life breath of God into his followers, just as God did at creation, and just as God did to restore the dry bones of Israel.

What Jesus says next, however, may be the heart of the matter for us in today's readings. Our translation reads: "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." In most translations, the second use of the word "sins" is noted as "understood." What that means is that the word "sins" is not in the original second clause at all, but translators think it must have been meant. "If you retain any, they are retained."

But Sandra Schneiders gave me new insight into this also. Leaving out her discussion of the difference in grammatical cases and voices, Schneiders writes, “A more adequate reading would be the following: ‘Of whomever you forgive the sins, they (the sins) are forgiven to them; whomever you hold fast [or embrace], they are held fast.’ Let me say that again: “Of whomever you forgive the sins, they (the sins) are forgiven to them; whomever you hold fast [or embrace], they are held fast.’”

The Spirit of God, the breath of God, Wind – it is all “ruah” in Hebrew. And with that Breath, that Spirit, Jesus sends out his disciples – and us – as the Father has sent him, he says. Last week we heard what that meant for Jesus – when Jesus said that he had glorified God – made God’s presence visible – and in so doing had accomplished what God sent him to do. The lesson for us here? We are sent out by the Spirit to make God’s presence visible, as Jesus did. And we have the incredible power to free people, to forgive, and then to *embrace*.

This feast of Pentecost, then, is about recognizing that God’s spirit goes outside the tents of our own construction, resting on those outside our boundaries. And God’s spirit also invites us, *calls* us to step outside our *own* boundaries ourselves – to rub shoulders with and speak the language of others we do not know – so that we really *can* make the presence of God visible.

It is not lost on me, though, that the words “breath” and “fire” that figure so prominently in our readings today have also played in the news this past week. “I can’t breathe,” said George Floyd – echoing Eric Garner’s words from 2014. Both men died – as have too many others – at the hands of men charged to serve and protect. And the flames that have consumed property in the aftermath do not seem like any tongues of fire from heaven... unless, perhaps, your skin or the skin of your mother or sister or brother matches the color of George’s and Eric’s... unless one can imagine that the Spirit of God, too, has had enough of power’s reign over the value of people’s lives.

I don’t know what the implications are for my own sense of God or my own theology, but the question that comes to me is, why is it that we look at the flood in Noah’s time, as God’s intervention to save God’s creation, as God intervening to bring about *God’s* way, but do not see the Spirit of God present in our quarantined existence spawned by the pandemic, as the earth begins to heal itself and we reconnect with one another more deeply than ever. Why do we see the plagues God sends upon the Egyptians, as God intervening to free God’s people from abuse and subjugation and injustice, but fail to see the flames in cities before us now as coming from God’s cry for justice too long denied? The drowning of the

Egyptians in the Red Sea meant liberation for the Israelites, but genocide for the Egyptians. One group of protestors wielding armed weapons are lauded as standing up for their rights, while another group are labeled thugs. Language, in our hearing and in our speaking, is everything.

What will it take for us to realize that God is so much bigger than we want God to be? That God's love encompasses, encircles, *embraces* us ALL? What will it take for us to see that *God's breath* was in George and Eric? This is not politics. This is the gospel – the gospel that says whatever we do to the least, we do to the one we profess to follow.

We need to listen to one another, to really hear one another's stories, each in his or her own language, to listen for the breath of God whispering there, calling us to be our better selves.

The COVID-19 virus is life-threatening. But so is the doctrine of white supremacy that underlies racism, that allows the violence propagated on persons of color or those who are transgendered or the poor or anyone else. My friend, Bob Bond, is an interim pastor – only at any one church for a prescribed period of time – so perhaps he can afford to be brave and honest. In his sermon for today, he writes:

“How many of us would expect to be executed for writing a fraudulent check? How many of us would expect to be executed for suspicion of stealing something from a construction site? How many of us would expect to be executed for defending our person from an armed intrusion into our home? We don't like to talk about white supremacy and [I] imagine that some have already turned off their radios or computers because this kind of talk makes us all uncomfortable. It is a conversation we must have. Those of us in the dominant culture must recognize how we support the marginalization of those not like us. We condemn the violent response of people to injustice while we continue to build up weapons to assault those we believe to be acting unjustly or threateningly toward us. We accept that some people are deprived of livelihood, housing, healthcare, and basic security and reject when they respond by depriving the dominant culture of these same things. We are called by the Spirit of God to be prophetic witnesses to God's love for all people, God's demand that we live justly and love mercy. God is calling the Church to break out of its complacency and feel the Spirit descend on us so we can speak God's truth to others in the words that they will understand. God is birthing a new church.”

If we celebrate this feast of Pentecost only as the birthday of the church – an anniversary of an event that occurred in the past – we have missed the point entirely. The Spirit continues pouring over the earth. But we must be willing to *receive* that Spirit. And it will cost us to do that.

Our presiding Bishop pointed us to this collect from our Prayer Book:

Grant, O God, that your hold and life-giving Spirit may so move every human heart, and especially the hearts of the people of this land, that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that our divisions being healed, we may live in justice and peace, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

- [Numbers 11:24-30](#)
- [Acts 2:1-21](#)
- [John 20:19-23](#)
- [Psalm 104:25-35, 37](#)