

“Receive the Holy Spirit”

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John 20:19-23

A tourist in New York City decided to visit one of those big, downtown, mainline Protestant churches on a Sunday morning. The churches along New York’s main avenues can be pretty formal, with the ushers dressed alike and doing their duty in almost military precision. When the visiting woman walked in, she was very properly greeted by an usher who showed her to seat near the front of the sanctuary. About halfway through the service, the woman began to clap her hands, and every once in a while, to shout Amen, demonstrating her enthusiasm in what was going on in a public way. After a while, an usher came down and spoke to her quietly and politely saying, “Ma’am, are you alright? Do you need to leave for any reason?” She answered back joyfully, “No, Sir, I’ve just got the Spirit!” To which he replied, “Well, you certainly didn’t get it here!” (1)

Today is Pentecost Sunday, commonly celebrated as the birthday of the church, when the Spirit of God came upon the disciples and transformed them into brave followers of the crucified and risen Christ. Around the globe today, Christians are thinking about the life-giving Spirit of God, the power and energy we have received, and continue to receive. Those three little words, “continue to receive,” is what may have stumped that staid New York City usher in his formality, when the visiting woman started shouting something that was not printed in the bulletin. Heaven forbid! The celebration of Pentecost is not just something that happened way back when. It is the affirmation that the Spirit of God continues to fill us with power and energy to do new things in the name of Jesus Christ.

We usually read the Pentecost script from the Acts of the Apostles – when the Spirit roared in as a mighty wind, and flaming tongues descended on the heads of everyone gathered. They were set on fire for the work of the church – hence this is the one day of the year the church wears red. John’s account of the church’s receiving the Spirit makes a fine complement to the rush of the mighty wind and tongues of fire. There are times when the Spirit comes in strong and overpowering ways as in the second chapter of Acts.

But there are other occasions when the Spirit may be less dramatic, but is found moving nonetheless, when it feels more like what John describes as the “breath of Christ.” (2) In our scripture reading this morning, Jesus comes upon his terrified disciples who had just left the hill of crucifixion and were hiding behind locked doors, probably wondering if they were next to die. Suddenly, the Risen Jesus stands among them and says, “Peace be with you.” It is a word that

speaks directly to their fear. Then Jesus breathes on them. He gives the disciples his breath.

It resurrects for them an ancient memory that goes way back to the creation story of Genesis. You remember ... God, kneeling down in the dust in the Garden of Eden, giving shape to a human creature for the first time. It was nothing but clay, until God breathed into the form – divine breath, holy air, and a human being came to life! And now, Jesus looks at these frightened disciples. He has shaped them already, not from the dust of Eden, but from the rubble of human living. He has shaped them from the pieces of his ministry among them, healing, teaching, breaking bread with them. He has pulled them together, up out of the violence and prejudice that haunted their lives in a land under military occupation, crushing them under the weight of poverty, and hatred, and a power that cares little for the oppressed. The Risen Christ, assuming the posture of God in Eden, breathes – and they are raised to new life. With that breath their fear gives way to a life filled with purpose. (3)

They come to life – for being the church, witnessing to the power of God’s love, peace, forgiveness, and justice. If Easter begins with the resurrection of Jesus, then Pentecost begins with the resurrection of the disciples, and the only way to describe what is happening is what Jesus himself says: “*As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*” Friends, the miracle of Pentecost is – that this is not a thing of the past; the life-giving Spirit among us is a present reality. The Spirit of God is with us now, moving among us, changing us, leading us forward and giving new life to the church.

My friend Shannon Johnson Kershner has written about how so many of us grew up singing that wonderful old hymn, “*I love to tell the story... to tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love.*” That is a huge part of the church’s ministry, to tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love. It defines our lives; it is the mission of Christian education and of our choirs; it made for a wonderfully successful Vacation Bible School this past week; it is the essence of our baptismal promises, and it is the meal around which we gather at the Communion Table today. My own life and vocation are shaped by that refrain – as much as anything else – *to tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love.* But we can never stop there. As my friend Shannon points out – that is only the first of the church’s two primary tasks – to keep alive the memory and the tradition of Jesus’ life and ministry.

The second of the church’s primary jobs is to be open to the winds of the Spirit, which lead us to discern how God is at work in the world, and in our lives, and in the church today. God did not stop speaking, and revealing, and breathing when the final period was placed at the end of the last AMEN in the Book of Revelation. The promise of God’s continual presence through the Spirit is what stands at the core belief of our Presbyterian understanding of church, indeed it’s our slogan: “The church is Reformed, and always willing to be reformed by the Spirit.” (4) We pass on the old, old story of Jesus and his love to our children and our children’s children, to be sure. But we also proclaim that God’s Spirit is still present in our

midst, opening us up to new ways of being Christ's body, that we in this generation could never imagine on our own.

You know change is hard, and change in the church makes people particularly anxious. Repeatedly we've seen headlines in the newspaper or religious publications that suggest that the mainline church is a thing of the past, we are losing members, and younger folks don't want to align themselves with institutions any more, soccer practice conflicts with church programming, more people describe themselves as "spiritual" than "religious" and consequently the church is not the draw that it used to be, and on and on and on. Admittedly some of that talk used to make me a little bit nervous – for my job security and pension and all. But I tell you what – I have come to perceive that it is the Spirit of God who is up to something, moving among us to envision and experience some new reality of being church together. I am not even sure what it looks like exactly, but I find myself feeling excited that some new thing called "church" is emerging.

Here at Shandon you see signs of this newness, and I'm not just talking about the fact that we had thirteen infants in the nursery last Sunday. I'm talking about things like – a brand new "Care of Creation" committee that is leading us in new ways to think and act as stewards of God's good earth. I'm talking about Jill Duffield coming to us in a few weeks under a new title – no longer Associate for Education and Outreach, but Associate Pastor for Discipleship to help us discern where God is leading us on a multifaceted journey of faith; I'm talking about your gracious willingness to participate this past year as a congregation testing new hymns; I'm talking about the conversations I hear around longtime ministries that are using more often the word "intergenerational" and being intentional about mixing us up for a renewed sense of community.

We will never let go of the *old, old story of Jesus and his love* – I promise. But as we face this new day of being Christian together in a culture that is less-so, may we be more open to the movement of God's Spirit challenging us and empowering us for the work of the gospel in new ways to meet this new day. Right now – I invite you – to take a deep breath. Just breathe; close your eyes if that will help you focus on breathing and hearing again... Jesus is saying to us right now: "Peace be with you." Take another breath... "Receive the Holy Spirit." Breathe... "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) Oft quoted preacher joke for Pentecost, recalled by Joanna Adams, "Windblown," 4th Pres, Chicago, 5/16/02.
- 2) Tom Troeger, "Breath to Breath, Life to Life," *Lectionary Homiletics*, 5/15/02.
- 3) Tom Are, "The Breath of Jesus," Village Presbyterian Church, 4/10/05.

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4) Shannon Johnson Kershner, "Living the Story," Black Mountain Presbyterian Church, 5/22/11.