

# Breath of the Spirit – Pentecost

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### NPMC – May 28, 2023

*Scripture: Acts 2:1-21 and John 20:19-23*

*Hymns: VT 57 - Holy Spirit, Come with Power, VT 737 - Breathe on Me, Breath of God*

**Acts 2:1-21** (NRSV) - When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup> All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

<sup>5</sup> Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup> And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. <sup>7</sup> Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? <sup>8</sup> And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? <sup>9</sup> Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, <sup>11</sup> Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” <sup>12</sup> All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” <sup>13</sup> But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

<sup>14</sup> But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Fellow Jews and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. <sup>15</sup> Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. <sup>16</sup> No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

<sup>17</sup> ‘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.

<sup>18</sup> Even upon my slaves, both men and women,  
in those days I will pour out my Spirit,  
and they shall prophesy.

<sup>19</sup> And I will show portents in the heaven above  
and signs on the earth below,  
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

<sup>20</sup> The sun shall be turned to darkness  
and the moon to blood,

before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day.

<sup>21</sup> Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

**John 20:19-23** - <sup>19</sup> When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” <sup>20</sup> After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” <sup>22</sup> When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

We all breathe in and out tens of thousands of times each day. In and out. We do it without thinking – it works automatically, without conscious thought or intention. So it takes a concerted effort to notice our breath – at least, when all is going well in our physical and mental health. In her reflections on this week’s Scripture, Bible commentator Angela Parker notes this about breath: “I am struck by the sense that many of us have not experienced sustained peace since 2020. I think that collectively as a society the multiple pandemics of Covid-19, racial injustices, the surge of White Christian nationalism, and rising gun violence have left many of us holding our collective breath waiting for the next tragedy to occur. Many of us desire a double portion of peace so that we can breathe again.”<sup>1</sup> When we are grieving, when we are in pain, when we are fearful or anxious, we struggle to breathe. In light of this, Pentecost is a reminder that God’s Spirit is as close to us as our very breath.

On this Pentecost Sunday, we are reminded of an often-overlooked name for God – that of Breath or Breath of Life. God as Breath appears many times throughout the Bible, in part because of a play on words in the original Hebrew and Greek. In the biblical languages, the words for wind, breath, and spirit are all related. So at the beginning of Genesis, we read that “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters” (Gen. 1:1-2). In Hebrew, the *ruach Elohim* – that is, the wind-breath of the Divine – hovers over the face of the deep. This is the same wind-breath that will breathe the breath of life into the first human in the next chapter of Genesis, and which is related to the Hebrew words for womb

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<sup>1</sup> Angela N. Parker, “Commentary on John 20:19-23,” *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/day-of-pentecost/commentary-on-john-2019-23-5>

(*rechem*) and compassion (*racham*), evoking a sense of loving, life-giving creativity. The New Testament also uses profound language to speak of the Spirit. As Rachel Held Evans reminds us, when speaking with Nicodemus, “Jesus says the Spirit is like wind. Employing a bit of wordplay, he uses the Greek word *pneuma* – which means both Spirit and wind – and says the windy Spirit blows wherever it pleases. You can hear the windy Spirit, Jesus says, and you can even see its effects. But you don’t know where it has come from and you don’t get to tell it where to go. ... The windy Spirit just shows up and changes everything.”<sup>2</sup>

This is certainly true in the story of Pentecost. In our passage from Acts 2 for today, we are told that the Spirit shows up in several different ways to the group of disciples gathered together “in one place,” in one of the early house-churches. First we are told that a sudden sound “like the rush of a violent wind” filled the house where they were meeting. The Wind-Breath of God came among them like the whirlwind from which God spoke to Job (Job 38). The Spirit of God was unmistakably present in the gathered group of believers! The Spirit then comes to rest on each of them, breathing life into a flame above each of their heads; all are equally marked by the Spirit’s presence, by the inspiration and light of God. And thirdly, as we heard a sample of this morning in our Scripture reading, they are given the gift of multiple languages, of speaking once-unfamiliar words. In a reversal of the story of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11), this is the gift of giving voice to many nations, building understanding, peace, and relationship among the many diverse peoples who lived in Jerusalem, who

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<sup>2</sup> Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2015), 196-197.

were astonished to hear these prophetic messages in their own mother-tongues on the lips of the disciples.

Interestingly, this story is full of references to other biblical appearances of God – the Wind-Breath of God hovering over the waters at creation, the God of Moses calling him from the Burning Bush, the Word of God which was the method of God’s creation of the world, who spoke through the ancient prophets, and then came to live among us as the Wisdom-Word incarnate, Jesus. In each of these, the Breath of God inspires, calls, and empowers the believers. This is especially important in that this is the moment we remember as the birth of the church – the moment in which God breathed the Breath of Life into this body of ordinary believers, creating unity among the many and enabling us to speak prophetic words of good news to one another and those we meet. It is a powerful and empowering moment of mystery and inspiration!

Our passage from John 20 for today provides a helpful balance to the (let’s face it) somewhat idealized narrative from Acts. Though Acts will go on to recognize the difficulties faced by the early church (such as Peter and John’s arrest already in Acts 4), the Gospel of John seems to shift the story around a bit, making the coming of the Holy Spirit occur a bit earlier in the events of those days. Whereas Acts has the Holy Spirit come after Jesus has triumphantly ascended into heaven (Acts 1), in John, these events take place on Easter Sunday itself. So it’s on the very first day of Jesus being raised that he appears to the disciples in this way; before this, Mary Magdalene had been the sole witness at the empty tomb. As commentator Angela Parker points out, this version of the story highlights the very real sense of fear that was still hanging over

the disciples. We're told that they were all together in a locked room out of fear for those Jewish religious leaders who had handed their friend over to be killed just a few days earlier. In Acts, we're not told what the disciples' state of mind was; here, they were fearful and deeply anxious for their safety! They were living with what Parker calls "stifled breath," or "the inability to give full-throated voice to one's identity in the midst of living in fear through lost connection."<sup>3</sup> Betrayed by their own faith leaders, grieving their murdered friend and teacher, and waiting with baited breath, the risen Jesus comes to them, locked door and all, and breathes the Holy Spirit on them. In this way, Jesus effectively brings them "back to life." As Parker says, "Jesus' breath transforms fear into bold living and leads out of social death into community that can uphold and support our varying identities." Parker also points out that Jesus offers the fearful disciples "a double portion of peace" in this passage, saying "peace be with you" twice in this short encounter. As recipients of this "double portion of peace," Parker says, we are empowered to take on difficult work of discerning right from wrong through the power of the Spirit, of working together for justice, creating life out of chaos, inspiring each other and our communities to live compassionately and create real change for the better. In this time of pandemic and the rise of hate and prejudice, Parker writes, "it appears to me that the greatest sin of contemporary Jesus followers is the disbelief that we can leave our locked rooms and tackle pressing issues in our communities. We can tackle the sanctification and glorification of guns in our present society. We can tackle the sanctification of White Christian nationalism. We can tackle police reform. Jesus has given us a double portion of peace to breathe again. Let us be Jesus followers that

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<sup>3</sup> Parker, "Commentary on John 20:19-23."

transform society instead of being fearful disciples who are holding our collective breath.”<sup>4</sup>

One of the spiritual practices that I have learned during these anxious past few years of pandemic is the breath prayer. It’s a simple and ancient exercise of focusing on a short phrase, incorporating something to be taken on (on the inhale) and something to be let go (on the exhale). So for example, I could breathe in God’s love and breathe out that which makes me afraid, and repeat for ten slow breaths in and out. The repetitive nature of these kinds of prayers and focus on breathing slowly and deeply is a way of meditating on this Spirit-Breath that is so near to us, knitting together our bodies, minds, and spirits. It’s a small moment of Pentecost that’s available again and again to renew us and empower us, granting us that double portion of peace for our journeys of faith. And so, inspired by the Spirit who breathes life-giving words into our tired hearts, who gives us the voices to sing God’s praises, who intercedes with sighs too deep for words when we are speechless and breathless, I invite you to end in prayer:

Breath of Spring Congregational Prayer<sup>5</sup> - Carol Penner

We listen this morning to the sound of our own breath,  
and the breathing of those around us. [pause for 30 seconds]  
Thank you God for breath,  
for life flowing in and out of each of us.  
It is wonderful to be alive—thank you for life!  
Thank you for the sweet scent of the breath of spring;  
for blossoms--apricot, cherry, peach,  
for daffodils and sweet hyacinths,  
for the good earth, turned over and ready for seed,  
for the strong sun and its power.  
Thank you that you are a God who hears our breath.  
You hear our slow steady breaths as we’ve slept,  
the panting of children as they run and play,  
the deep breaths of hard work and manual labour,  
our slow sighs when we are weary or filled with grief.

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<sup>4</sup> Parker, “Commentary on John 20:19-23.”

<sup>5</sup> <https://carolpenner.typepad.com/leadinginworship/2017/05/breath-of-spring-congregational-prayer.html>

You hear our first little baby breath,  
you are the one who hears and knows our final breath.  
Your Spirit moves over the earth, enlivening us all.  
Help us to exhale hatred, and inhale your love  
Help us to exhale greed, and inhale your generosity.  
Help us to exhale despair, and inhale your hope.  
Breathe life into peacemakers,  
in the conflicts in our own town and country,  
where class and race and ideology divide us.  
Breathe life into peacemakers in Palestine, Colombia, and Yemen,  
where war has ruled so long.  
Breathe inspiration into our government leaders and diplomats,  
helping them work for peaceful solutions.  
Forgive us when we are not outraged by war and violence,  
and instead are numb to every new story of destruction.  
On this most beautiful of days,  
with your Spirit blowing over this land,  
thank you for giving us this chance  
to be part of your breathtaking work,  
humble servants in the service of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen