

“Pentecost Loud and Quiet”
May 28, 2023

Acts 2:1-11
John 20:19-23

This morning we heard two ways of describing the gift of the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of Life coming into our lives.

Acts gives us the loud story of Pentecost.

John’s Gospel tells of the risen Christ coming to the disciples in the quiet of Easter evening.

As with most cases in which the biblical writers tell of the same event with different stories, each account has some particular grain of truth and each needs to be heard in its own voice. In general, I’m a strong advocate for keeping such stories separate. You know I don’t like to read Matthew’s story of the visit of the magi in the same Christmas Eve service in which we hear Luke’s account of the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks.

But I’m setting aside my standards this morning so that we might gain a deeper, multi-faceted appreciation of the Spirit of God and in so doing understand our own lives in new ways.

The one thing that these two very different stories have in common is their grounding in the Judaism that was central to the life of Jesus and the beginning of the church.

Years in the wilderness shaped the Hebrew people. When speaking of God, they often used the image of the strong desert wind. In the desert the wind would rise up suddenly, prove incapable of being controlled, possess enormous power, and then leave—always unseen, though its effects were quite visible.

The wind, you remember, was called the *ruach*, the Hebrew word that we also translate as “spirit” and as “breath.” The Hebrew people understood the *ruach*, the unseen but powerful wind, as like the very breath of God. This breath, this spirit, is the life that fills each human being. The psalmist tells us it is the very life that animates all living things, affirming: “When you, O God, take away their breath, their spirit, they die.”

The story from the Acts of the Apostles that we heard first this morning is a wonderful and lively account of the coming of the Holy Spirit. When the early Christians—raised and nurtured as Jewish people—told of their experience during the Jewish feast of Pentecost, they turned to the desert experiences, to the wilderness memories and images: “Suddenly there came from the sky what sounded like a strong driving wind, a noise which filled the whole house where they were sitting....They were all filled with the Holy Spirit. Tongues as of fire rested on each of the followers of Jesus.’

This is a story that we love to hear. We read it every year. It *inspires* us. We dress in red to remember the flames and we walk into the church, passing beneath those red and orange streamers reminding us of the tongues as of fire. Maybe we should turn the ceiling fans up to “11” this morning and experience the power of the wind. It is just the story that those who need a little shaking up need to hear.

And yet, it is difficult to hear about burning flames and violent winds in our time, not because they are unusual but because they are perhaps too close to our experience.

The world is burning. The smoke and haze of wildfires in the West spread to Iowa and farther east. The destructive fires of warfare burn in cities in Ukraine and villages in Sudan. All of this is happening as the entire planet grows hotter each year.

At the same time the violent winds continue to bring devastation. Last week, Typhoon Mawar hit Guam with a force much greater than the recent tornado in Coralville. But whether the destruction is nearby or far away, it is difficult to see the devastation of the wind and then sit calmly as the scriptures speak of a sound like the rush of a violent wind.

We need to remember that the fire and wind of Pentecost are not the real thing but images or even more precisely, similes—a noise *like* the rush of a violent wind, tongues *as* of fire. When the Spirit of God comes upon our lives, our congregation, we cannot speak with accuracy. We are left to our imagination. We imagine fire, but we walk under fabric.

The story from Acts suggests that the seemingly wild power in our lives might indeed be the Spirit of God. Again and again, we find ourselves doing things that astonish us. The Spirit leads us in directions we wouldn't dare take on our own. We give more than we expected to give. We love more than we expected to love.

And those watching wonder: “What’s going on?” “How can this be?”

Such questions are Pentecost responses. When there is confusion and bewilderment, the Spirit is present. Or maybe we could say when the Spirit is present there is confusion and bewilderment.

This reality led Krister Stendahl to suggest that we should invoke the Spirit when we are uncertain, when we do not know, when we are facing new situations.¹ In such times—*especially* in such times—we might say that we have the Spirit with us.

In a time like our own, when new situations seem to present themselves every day, when old answers have stopped making sense, it is important to cultivate an awareness that *just at this time* God's Spirit is at work in us and among us. There is a power here that works in us and through us that is beyond us as well.

At the same time, there is also a gentler way in which the Spirit comes to us, meeting us in our brokenness, offering the grace and peace that we seek.

When Jesus spoke of the Spirit of God, he spoke out of his own Jewish understanding: Early in his ministry he told a seeker: “The Spirit—the wind—the breath of God—blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” The Spirit of God works within our lives, works among us and through us, but we can neither control it nor see it any more than we can control or see the wind.

The powerful wind is also the gentle breeze that provides some welcome, cooling relief on a warm spring day. “When God sends forth the Spirit,” the psalmist says, “We are renewed.”

The Spirit of God is called the *Holy Spirit* because it makes us *alive*. The Spirit sets this life of ours in the presence of the living God and in the great river of eternal love.

This is the other story of the coming of the Spirit—the one we hear at the end of John’s Gospel. The risen Jesus comes to his disciples and speaks a word of peace. To those who are weary he speaks of peace—of wholeness and healing. So that there is no doubt about this peace *or* the One who offers it, he shows his hands and his side which still, even in this resurrected body, bear the signs of suffering. Even in the face of suffering, Christ’s peace—Christ’s wholeness and healing—will be a central experience of those who chose to follow.

And then Jesus does the strangest thing.

He *breathes* on the disciples.

“Receive the Holy Spirit,” he says. Receive what you really need to be alive. And so the old hymn invites us to gently sing, “Breathe on me breath of God, fill me with life anew.”

Just as God breathed the breath of life into the first human being, so the risen Christ breathes new life, the *Spirit of life* into the disciples. The good news of resurrection points toward just this renewal of creation. In raising Jesus from the dead, God has started a new creation.

We receive the Spirit so that we can make the love God in Jesus known to the world. By our actions, we bring the forgiveness of God to the world.

We live in unforgiving times. There is little room for error in these days and little tolerance of error as well. The polarization and divisions that we know in our nation and in our world are in many cases the detritus of decades and even centuries old animosities that have resulted in the inability or the unwillingness to forgive. We have chosen sides and those on the opposite side are held in contempt.

But here is the good news: the community of the church—and each of us individually—are given God’s Spirit, which among other things is a Spirit of forgiveness. It is a part of the new creation that God began in the risen Christ.

Here and there that creation becomes visible in our lives: we see those who have wronged us as finite creatures, distorted, as we are, by sin, no better and no worse, no higher and no lower than ourselves. We identify with the humanity of others and know in our hearts that we could have done the same wrong, inflicted the same injury upon them that was inflicted upon us.

Here and there, God’s new creation remains to be seen: places where we can’t forgive; places where forgiveness seems humanly impossible.

Yet even there—even at our limits as human beings—we catch a glimpse of the Creator who is beyond our limits, the God with a caring face who loves those whom we cannot, who forgives those whom we cannot. We catch a glimpse of the God who loves and forgives us even when we can neither love nor forgive.

The Spirit comes in loud, surprising ways.

The Spirit comes in quiet, surprising ways.

The Spirit overcomes the barriers to relationship that we build, revealing to all of us our common humanity.

In different ways, in surprising ways, God still gives us the energy of the Holy Spirit.

¹ Krister Stendahl, *Energy for Life*, pg. 43, 44.