

Pentecost Sunday - May 31, 2020 - Saint David's, Halifax NS

Readings: Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:24-34; I Corinthians 12:3b-13; John 20:19-23

Call to Worship:

God's loving Spirit is here with us now.

Praise be to God!

The Spirit breaks down all barriers that separate.

Praise be to God!

Come and worship in the unity of the Spirit.

We come as one to worship God.

Prayer for Pentecost:

In the beginning, the Spirit of God hovered over the waters
and brought forth life. Come, Holy Spirit, breathe on us, we pray.

At times, the Spirit of God was seen as a dove--
a symbol of peace. Come, Holy Spirit, breathe on us, we pray.

At times, the Spirit of God blows like wind,
or sings like breath--God's breath. Come, Holy Spirit, breathe on us, we pray.

On the Day of Pentecost, the Spirit of God appeared as
tongues of fire, igniting the church. Come, Holy Spirit, breathe on us, we pray.

Through the prophet Joel, God promised to pour out the
Spirit on all people--men, women, young, old. Come, Holy Spirit,
breathe on us, we pray.

Come, Holy Spirit--life-giver, peacemaker, wind and flame of
prophets. Come to our hearts and to our community of faith.

Come, Holy Spirit. Amen.

Acts 2:1-8, 11b-21 (The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language)

¹⁻⁴ When the Feast of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Without warning there was a sound like a strong wind, gale force—no one could tell where it came from. It filled the whole building. Then, like a wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks, and they started speaking in a number of different languages as the Spirit prompted them.

⁵⁻¹¹ There were many Jews staying in Jerusalem just then, devout pilgrims from all over the world. When they heard the sound, they came on the run. Then when they heard, one after another, their own mother tongues being spoken, they were thunderstruck. They couldn't for the life of them figure out what was going on, and kept saying, "Aren't these all Galileans? How come we're hearing them talk in our various mother tongues? . . .

They're speaking our languages, describing God's mighty works!"

¹² Their heads were spinning; they couldn't make head or tail of any of it. They talked back and forth, confused: "What's going on here?"

¹³ Others joked, "They're drunk on cheap wine."

¹⁴⁻²¹ That's when Peter stood up and, backed by the other eleven, spoke out with bold urgency: "Fellow Jews, all of you who are visiting Jerusalem, listen carefully and get this story

straight. These people aren't drunk as some of you suspect—it's only nine o'clock in the morning. This is what the prophet Joel announced would happen:

"In the Last Days," God says,

"I will pour out my Spirit on every kind of people:

your sons will prophesy, also your daughters;

your young men will see visions, your old men dream dreams.

When the time comes, I'll pour out my Spirit on those who serve me, men and women both, and they'll prophesy.

I'll set wonders in the sky above and signs on the earth below,

blood and fire and billowing smoke,

the sun turning black and the moon blood-red,

before the Day of the Lord arrives, the Day tremendous and marvellous;

And whoever calls out for help to me, God, will be saved."

One: The word of the Lord. **All: Thanks be to God!**

John 20:19-23 (NRSV)

¹⁹When 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." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

One: The gospel of the Lord. **All: Praise to you, O Christ.**

Reflection:

"Take a deep breath" is an instruction we hear from doctors or from people trying to calm us down if we are angry or nervous, or from excited people wanting us to blow out all the candles on our birthday cakes. My singing teacher used to tell us to take several deep breaths before we went on stage for a concert and it would physically relax us and reduce the butterflies in the stomach.

Whenever we are about to do something important or a little scary or exciting, we often naturally pause and take a deep breath before plunging in. It is as if we know instinctively that we need all the oxygen we can get to empower us for the task.

It is Easter evening, according to John, when the Risen Jesus appears to his disciples and commissions them to continue his work. Echoing the creation story in Genesis 2 where God "formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life," Jesus breathes on his disciples and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." "Take a deep breath," he seems to say, "for I have important work for you to do in this world. You are to continue my ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation between God and people and among people."

Pentecost is the day when the church was born as part of the new creation of the Risen Lord, the day when the church first “breathed the breath of God.” The Hebrew and Greek words for “Spirit” also mean “breath” and “wind.” As God’s Spirit moved on the face of the deeps at creation and brought things to life, so God’s Spirit blew like a mighty wind on the gathered community in Jerusalem and brought the church to life.

Or, in the image from John’s Gospel, Jesus breathed into his disciples and they received his Spirit, his life. They were reborn, transformed into new beings ready to live for Christ.

Modern day celebrations of Pentecost in the church often include balloons and red streamers and trumpet blasts to mimic the great sound of the wind of the spirit. Sometimes there is birthday cake to mark the birthday of the church. There is nothing wrong with these exuberant rituals for surely one of the gifts of the Spirit is joy.

But Pentecost is not just for the times when we are feeling triumphant and light-hearted. It is also for the times when we are feeling anxious or overwhelmed. Those first disciples waiting for they knew not what were a defeated bunch. They had been through the unspeakable agony of watching their beloved friend tortured and executed on a cross. If we follow Luke’s timeline in Acts, the disciples have encountered the resurrected Christ but have then seen him disappear from their sight. They are not ready for balloons and cake. Not yet.

When the amazing experience of mighty wind and tongues of fire does happen to the disciples, Peter looks to the prophet Joel for explanation with the announcement of the outpouring of God’s Spirit upon all flesh. He includes Joel’s words about portents of judgment in images of blood and fire and darkness. The gift of the life-giving Spirit comes when all seems lost, when turmoil reigns, when the light is almost gone. The Spirit comes when the need is greatest.

Like now. In the midst of a global crisis beyond what any of us have ever experienced. "Unprecedented" is the new daily byword. Even as we see signs of hope, of re-opening, there is so much uncertainty. In our own context, what will worship look like and feel like when we are able to return to the sanctuary? So much to think about.

So, “take a deep breath.” “Receive the Holy Spirit,” says Jesus. Let the Spirit fill you, shake you, transform you, move you, comfort you, challenge you, direct you.

One of our hymns says:

O Wind of God, come bend us, break us,
till humbly we confess our need;
then in your tenderness remake us,
revive, restore, for this we plead.

Taking these words to heart, we realize that the gift of the Spirit is not something to be wished for lightly. As Jesus said, “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” [Jn. 3:8] The prayer of the words in the hymn is for change and growth and for getting rid of what hinders us from being the people God has created us to be. God

can revive and restore us in vitality and faithfulness beyond our imagining, but are we ready to follow where the Spirit leads? Take a deep breath.

O Breath of life, come sweeping through us;
revive your church with life and power.
O Breath of life, come cleanse, renew us,
and fit your church to meet this hour.

The hymn is honest about the frailties of the church in face of its daunting task to be a force for compassion and goodness in the world. But it is not despairing. It expresses great hope and trust that God can indeed bring the dormant church to life even as God brought the church to life in the first place. We need not be mired in our fears and failures and frustrations. The love of Christ, stronger than death itself, can move in us and among us and through us so that all the world can know this love.

The needs are great. There is much to do. But the Spirit is waiting to inspire us with courage and vision and wisdom for the task. So let us “take a deep breath” and “receive the Holy Spirit.” Let us be willing to go where the Spirit leads us. And even and especially through these muddling days let’s rededicate ourselves to Christ’s work for the glory of God and for the healing and re-creation of the world.

Amen. Thanks be to God!

Prayer:

Come, Holy Spirit, breathe on us today. Give us new life and new vision.
Fill our hearts with the knowledge of your love.
Come, Holy Spirit, breathe into our church. Guide us into the future.
Give us the boldness to proclaim your good news to everyone.
Come, Holy Spirit, breathe into our community with hope and new life.
May your love and peace reign in every heart.
Come, Holy Spirit, breathe on our world today bringing healing to all.
Renew the face of the earth.
Come, Holy Spirit, breathe on us today
and on those who especially need your renewing strength and healing comfort.
We think of those we know and those we do not know, praying your grace on them.
Eternal God, thank you for our unity in the Spirit with all your people, past, present
and future.
Through Christ our Lord in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
all glory and honour are yours, Creator God, forever. Amen.

*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you.
Amen.*