

“Holy Comforter/Holy Challenger”  
John 20:19-23 | Acts 2:1-21  
Prepared by Rev. Julia Watkins for  
Westminster Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC  
May 28, 2023

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

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

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. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

‘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.  
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,  
in those days I will pour out my Spirit,  
and they shall prophesy.

And I will show portents in the heaven above  
and signs on the earth below,  
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.  
The sun shall be turned to darkness  
and the moon to blood,  
before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day.  
Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

The word of the Lord.  
**Thanks be to God.**

Happy birthday, Church! As you may have gathered, today is Pentecost Sunday, when we celebrate the birth of the Church some 2000 years ago. This is the day when the Holy Spirit swept into the disciples' lives, and together, they became the body of Christ. Happy birthday, Church! Happy birthday to you.

Now, if this were the regular kind of birthday party, you all know how things would go. The plans would be made. The invitations would go out. The guests would gather. The music would play. The mingling would commence. The volume would rise. The anticipation would build. Then, when the energy had peaked, the main event would begin. The cake would be carried out. The candles would blaze. The singing would start, probably off-key but heartfelt all the same. The guest of honor would receive all this attention with some combination of embarrassment and glee. Then, with gusto, they would draw a deep breath and blow and blow and blow until every last candle—whether 9 or 99—had been extinguished.

The breath we summon in celebration of our own birthdays is the same life-giving force that enables us to sing and swim and even sleep. Take a moment to notice your breath. Breathe in. Breathe out. Did you know that we take around 25,000 breaths each day? In that same amount of time, around 30 pounds of air enters and exits our lungs. Our breath is both powerful and mysterious. In fact, scientists are still discovering many of the ways breathing affects our whole being.

After experiencing recurring episodes of bronchitis and pneumonia, journalist James Nestor received an unusual prescription. His doctor instructed him to take a breathing class. It may seem counterintuitive to practice something each of us does from the moment we're born, but Nestor was willing to give it a shot.<sup>1</sup> In the process, he was inspired to learn more about human health and wholeness as they relate to the basic task of breathing. Through his research, Nestor discovered that how we breathe affects everything from our blood pressure to our mental state. Want to lower stress? Reduce inflammation? Sleep better? Don't get me wrong; I'm no expert here, but Nestor would say it's all about your breath.

Our breath works in and through us in a multitude of ways. We can harness it for amazing feats of athleticism. For example, world record divers have been known to hold their breath for up to twelve and a half minutes. Any yogi or runner knows that breathing keeps us balanced and refreshes weary limbs. We can deliberately deepen our breath to enter a more restful state. Our breath lets our brain know when to be on high alert and when it's safe to relax. We use our breath to shout and to sing, to whisper, to whistle, to laugh, and to cry.

*Breathe.* We may hardly notice it, but our breath is always with us, the animating force working in and through us in a multitude of ways. It strengthens and sustains us. It calms and comforts us. It fills our lungs and gives us life.

Breath is so integral to our experience as living beings that it's no surprise it appears so frequently across the pages of scripture. In Hebrew, the same word that means *breath* also means *wind* or *spirit*. That word, *Ruach*, enters the divine story almost immediately. In the beginning, God's creative *Ruach* swept over the face of the waters, and the world came into being.<sup>2</sup> After the great flood that swept up Noah and his ark, God made a *Ruach* blow over the earth, and the waters subsided.<sup>3</sup> The *Ruach* compels the prophets to speak brave words and take bold action.

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<sup>1</sup> Nestor, James. *Breath*. London: Penguin Life, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Gen. 1:2

<sup>3</sup> Gen. 8:1

They point towards one who is coming, saying “the *Ruach* of the Lord shall rest on him.”<sup>4</sup> And, indeed, it does. At Jesus’ baptism, the Spirit descends on him like a dove. Not long after, Jesus began preaching, saying “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.”<sup>5</sup> The Spirit is difficult to define but ever present. “It blows where it chooses,” said Jesus, “and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.”<sup>6</sup>

Holy breath. Holy wind. Holy Spirit. The same Spirit that enlivens us today has been present from the very beginning, creating, inspiring, and making all things new. At Pentecost, we celebrate the Spirit, which “binds us together with all believers in the one body of Christ, the Church.”<sup>7</sup> Like our breath, the Spirit works in and through us in a multitude of ways.

Recall the passage from John’s gospel, which Marlon read earlier. In it, Jesus had died, and his disciples were huddled together in an upper room, not yet aware that he had risen. Out of nowhere, he appeared among them, bearing the wounds of the crucifixion but as real as they had ever known him. His message to a hurt and fearful people? “Peace be with you.” Of all the messages Jesus could have made sure to get across in this brief window, that was the one that mattered in the moment. Peace.

Jesus didn’t offer his peace in word only. He extended it to the disciples such that it might always live within them. Before departing, Jesus *breathed* on those gathered, imparting the peace he preached and practiced during his time on earth. He didn’t abandon those he loved but gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit to reside with them always.

As descendants of those early disciples, we, too, have inherited Christ’s peace. We might experience that peace through silence or in service to others, or perhaps we glimpse it when we are in the presence of something beautiful, something true. It’s a peace that prevails even when we don’t feel particularly peaceful. A peace that sustains us in the wake of loss. A peace that shows us a way apart from grudges and revenge. A peace that carries us through tough decisions and uncertain times. Such peace doesn’t come from us but from the Holy Spirit, breathing within us that we might rest in God’s presence and hope in God’s promises, even in a broken and hurting world.

Jesus imparted the Holy Spirit when his disciples were lost and afraid. Like a long, deep breath, the Spirit comforted the disciples. It assured them that they were not alone. Peace is a powerful dimension of the Holy Spirit’s work in and through us.

Here’s what gets me, though. The Spirit of peace, which Jesus imparted to his disciples, is the very same that swept through the house on the day of the Church’s wildly unpredictable, windswept birth. The Holy Spirit didn’t only arrive to settle the hearts of those in fear. It also came to stir them up!

As today’s second story goes, Jesus had just departed. A dwindling number of followers had already gotten their hopes up once when Jesus was raised from the dead. Now, they had been twice abandoned, or so they thought, left behind by a Lord who had ascended into heaven.

Sitting around, all “woe is me,” they were suddenly swept up in a sacred cyclone. Before those gathered knew what was happening, “the rush of a violent wind” burst through both doors and windows, filling the whole house, and fueling flames above their heads. That same wind

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<sup>4</sup> Is. 11:2

<sup>5</sup> Lk. 4:18

<sup>6</sup> Jn. 3:8

<sup>7</sup> “Brief Statement of Faith.” <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/brief-statement-of-faith/>

filled their lungs, and when they opened their mouths to speak, there was a cacophony louder than a band of bagpipes.

The chaos drew a crowd. Pilgrims from all over the place came to see what all the racket was about, each of them drawn towards the sound of their own language. When they reached the house, they were shocked to discover that those speaking were all Galileans, just the regular country folks from up the road. But unlike regular country folks, they were speaking languages from across region, from thousands of miles away.

What was going on? Different theories instantly arose. While some stood by in amazement, others jumped to conclusions. Had the Galileans perhaps had a few too many mimosas with their breakfast? Rumors were flying when Peter jumped in to clarify. No, this wasn't some wild bacchanal. It was, as the prophets predicted, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, the breath of life blown into Christ's body, the Church.

Here, the Spirit rushes in as a wild surprise, no time for anybody to put on their smiling faces and their best behavior. One scholar writes, "In Acts, the coming of the Holy Spirit is not associated with polite murmurs, white gloves, and dainty manners but, as Jesus predicted, with power—the kind of power that could knock a person into orbit, even "to the ends of the earth."<sup>8</sup> Here, the Holy Spirit is working in and through this people to wake them up, to bring them together, and to send them out.

Could this be the same Spirit that Jesus imparted to his disciples only days—maybe even hours—earlier? The one that filled the room more like a gentle breath, and less like a violent wind?

That's a part of Pentecost's wonder. Just when we think we've seen the Spirit, she blows in or bubbles up in some unexpected way. Maybe it's in the gift of genuine laughter after a season of solemnity. Or, in the slow opening of hearts to some messy relationship. In the nudge towards something you never imagined yourself doing. Or, in the knitting back together after some significant loss. In the shifting of attention from self to others. In the sudden, sharp sensation that you can't just keep going through the motions. In the unsettled stirring in the face of the world's heartache. In the courage to face it anyway.

"The Spirit blows where it chooses" and keeps us on our toes with each strike against certainty. As Barbara Brown Taylor writes, the Holy Spirit "can scare us or comfort us, confuse us or clarify things for us."<sup>9</sup> It can also challenge us, calling us out of our sure certainty and toward a life of possibilities we can hardly even imagine. Like the breath we draw to run a race or quiet an infant with gentle lullabies, the Spirit works in and through us in a multitude of ways.

While they may surprise us, our infinitely variable experiences of the Spirit are not in conflict with one another. Instead, they work hand in hand to accomplish God's purposes in and through us. By the power of the Spirit, even a violent wind can serve as an instrument of peace, drawing people together across many lines of identity to bear witness to the risen Lord. By the power of the Spirit, a breath of peace can serve as a sending charge, compelling flawed and faithful people to pick up their cross and follow, even to the ends of the earth.

*Breathe.* Now imagine—the Spirit of God, the same Spirit that Jesus breathed on his disciples, the same Spirit that swept through the house at Pentecost, that Spirit is nearer to you

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<sup>8</sup> Childers, Jana. "Homiletical Perspective on Acts 2:1-21" in *Feasting on the Word*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown. "The Gospel of the Holy Spirit" in *Home by Another Way*. Boston: Cowley Publications, 1999.

than your very breath. The Spirit is near enough to know our needs and nimble enough to nudge us in the direction of all that is holy and true.

The Spirit claims and calls us, guides and encourages us, comforts and challenges us, feeds and sustains us through tangible signs of intangible grace, the pouring out of the cup and the breaking of the bread. In our worship, as in our daily living, may we tune our attention to the movement of the Spirit. And, may we remain open to the multitude of ways the Spirit works in and through us as participants in God's promises. Amen.