

Christ Episcopal Church

2 Emerson Street

East Norwalk, Connecticut 06855

The Day of Pentecost (A)

May 28, 2023

A Sermon by the Rev. Joseph Parrish

DRAFT

“Breath on Us Breath of God”

The Holy Gospel: John 20:19-23

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

What we know is that God loves us. May we share that love with others. Amen.

When Jesus ascended into heaven and was removed from human sight his disciples clung to his promise of the Holy Spirit.

What joy they had when the dove-like Holy Spirit descended like tongues of fire on the day of Pentecost. They realized their Lord was still alive (from a sermon by C. Thomas Hilton in "Dynamic Preaching").

Pentecost, the feast we celebrate today, is perhaps the oldest Christian festival. It appears to have been observed from the first year after the Ascension of the Lord and every year after, even before Easter or

Christmas were observed (Roger L. Ray, in "SermonMall" for Pentecost). Originally, the Jews observed Pentecost as the fiftieth day after the Passover. It was called the Feast of Weeks and seems to have been a spring harvest festival and also a celebration of the liberation from oppression after the escape from the Egyptians at the Red Sea (Constance M. Burgh in "SermonMall" for Pentecost). Pentecost has been called the 'birthday of the Church.' And, indeed, the disciples who were once hiding behind locked doors become new people once they have received the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Their fear was transformed into joy and power. Their timidness and backwardness fell away, and they boldly proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God. At Pentecost something dramatic happened.

In our gospel lesson for today, the writer speaks of the sending of the Holy Spirit as being something breathed on them by the resurrected Christ. In contrast the lesson from the book of the Acts of the Apostles describes the communal experience of the falling of the Holy Spirit upon the one hundred twenty praying there in one place. To reconcile these two experiences, one

needs to postulate perhaps two experiences of the coming of the Spirit--one in the presence of the Resurrected Christ, and the other after he had ascended into heaven.

The second experience is evidenced by all speaking in languages interpretable by their hearers. In the first experience the Risen Lord gives his disciples powers of absolution and forgiveness. One experience compliments the other--the first is more of an individual empowerment, the second more of a community empowerment. Pastor Theodore Wedel sees the Holy Spirit as a corporate, not individual possession

("LectionAid," Volume 8, Number 3, for June 2000, Page 9). But Amy Pauw says in her view, "the Spirit has always been a mysterious and free presence...transcending church structures" (from "Synthesis" quoting from "Christian Century," January 17, 1996, Page 113). Again, as soon as we think we have a handle on the Holy Spirit, the Spirit just slips away, not being contained in any one of our mental constructs. But who would want a God that was able to be contained by our conscious or unconscious mind? Someone has noted that defining the Spirit is a bit like defining "time." The

Spirit cannot be defined in the classic understanding of the word "define" because the word "define" means 'to put a boundary around' or 'to put an end to' ("Synthesis").

But the Holy Spirit both knows no boundaries and has no end. The Holy Spirit is not just extraordinary power, but super-infinite power, exceeding that of any boundaries we can conceive. Of course, the Holy Spirit is God as we know God.

Meister Eckhard noted that "God is not attained by a process of addition to anything in the soul, but by a process of subtraction, of dropping things that get in the way."

What will we allow God to subtract from our lives and our lifestyles in order to fill us with the Holy Spirit?

Roger Ray, a pastor in Springfield, Missouri, said that when he announced to his parents that he was going to major in religion in college, they were not so sure of his decision, although his mother was a hard-working secretary in their church, and both parents were very active church members. He said, "I suppose I was just a bit too full of it all when I came home [from college that first year]." He was talking a hundred miles an hour and wanting so much

for his parents to understand, to experience the excitement of faith which seemed to be coming to life for him. He continued, "I must have pushed it over the line one day in talking about the Holy Spirit when my father interrupted me to say, "Now son, we just don't believe in spirits." ("SermonMall")

There was a great uproar at the Chili Pepper Institute of the University of New Mexico when a new hybrid chili pepper was announced. A jalapeno pepper had been crossed with an ordinary bell pepper to create a milder tasting pepper. One chili pepper aficionado protested that the pepper's

true flavor had been ruined by [quote] "a few who can't take the heat." (from "LectioAid")

Perhaps we don't want to feel the heat in our breast as we are warmed by the Holy Spirit. It can be a life-changing event. It is scary to encounter the living God so closely for the first time. We would prefer that the Sunday hour not disturb us too much or cause any change in our life. But that means we think we can control the Holy Spirit.

Zan Holmes, a great African American preacher, tells the story of his seminary days when he was enrolled in a preaching class.

His assignment was to write a sermon with the anticipation that it would be preached at an appropriate time. It was early in the class and Zan had a good start on his sermon. He had been asked by the senior minister in the church in which he was interning to read the gospel lesson for that Sunday morning. Zan read the lesson and then settled back to listen to the sermon. But the senior pastor, Dr. I. B. Loud, stepped to the pulpit and told how proud everybody was of Zan and his efforts to become a minister. With that he simply announced that he thought that it would be a good idea if "Brother Zen came

to the pulpit and delivered the sermon of the morning." Zan Holmes said he nearly died right on the spot! He was terrified as he walked from his chair to the pulpit. He says he thinks there are still fingernail marks gouged into the wood of the pulpit where he clutched for dear life trying to think of something to say. Finally, he remembered the sermon that he was writing for the preaching class. His mind raced and he began to preach that sermon. He said it was pretty good, all three and a half minutes of it when he then ran out. He felt so alone, so empty, so vulnerable as he stood before that

anticipating congregation. He began to cry, and it was then he heard an older woman in the congregation say, "Help him, Jesus." A few moments later he heard the familiar voice of an older man who sang in the choir. His powerful bass voice was heard to rumble through the congregation, "Come Holy Spirit." Zan said he looked down on the front pew and saw two precious little girls who began to clap their hands and sing, "Amen, amen, amen, amen, amen." Before long the entire congregation was clapping and singing, and Zan Holmes said, "I just stood there and watched God work." Zan

said he learned a valuable lesson that morning: "It is the Holy Spirit who finishes the sermon." There is power available to us in the truly human moments of life when we let the power of the Holy Spirit come into us, empower us, and then flow out from us to others. (Rodney E. Wilmouth in "SermonMall")

In an airplane cabin we are instructed to put on our oxygen masks first before we assist others. In like manner, we should be filled with the Holy Spirit before we can be of real good to others. Ask, believing, for God to give you the Holy Spirit, and it will

happen because God wills each of us and all of us to be filled with the Spirit. Some have commented that the problem with church today is that the bland are leading the bland.

A Sunday School teacher was taking his class into the church sanctuary. He asked, "Now why is it important for us to be quiet in church?" A little girl responded, "Because people are sleeping."

Are we asleep? I think not. We are not asleep. So let us move out in faith, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to do the will of our Lord

In around 1878, the Rev. Dr. Edwin Hatch of England and Canada penned these famous lines, for Hymn 508 in our Episcopal Hymnal 1982:

1 Breathe on me, Breath of God,
fill me with life anew,
that I may love the way you love,
and do what you would do.

2 Breathe on me, Breath of God,
until my heart is pure,
until my will is one with yours,
to do and to endure.

3 Breathe on me, Breath of God,

so shall I never die,
but live with you the perfect life
for all eternity.

[Author: Edwin Hatch, c. 1878]

Let us pray:

Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly dove.
Alight on us, and teach us from above.
Amen.

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A few years ago, Helen Marshall, one of St. John's seniors well into her eighties who has since passed into God's nearer presence confided in me, "Reverend King (my predecessor) told me a few years ago that we no longer say. 'Holy Ghost'. but now we say, 'Holy Spirit.'" It was a rather big change for Helen to call the Holy Ghost, the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is like that, as soon as we think we have a 'handle' on the Holy Spirit, we find the Spirit has eluded us again--so much like God perhaps. A.W. Tozer in "Christianity Today" (May 24, 1999, Page

43) noted that [quote] "the Holy Spirit is a person,...not enthusiasm,...not courage,...not energy,...not the personification of all good qualities,...actually not the 'personification' of anything,...[but] a person." [endquote]

We have difficulty in expressing our affinity to the personhood of the Holy Spirit, so we may speak as if Christ is present, or we address our prayers to Father God, but we are actually talking to the Holy Spirit who relays our prayers to Christ and his Father. The Spirit is the person of God who is 'with us' now that Christ has ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the

Father. But the invisibility of the Holy Spirit seems to 'put us off.' We would rather think of God as creator of heaven and earth, some sort of mighty cosmic force that comes into play when we need to cross the Red Sea, or get through a red light. Or more sentimentally we prefer thinking about Christ the Son of God who lived and died as one of us. The Holy Spirit of course cannot be separated from either the Father or the Son, but indeed the Holy Spirit is a separate entity or separate person of the Holy Trinity. And hopefully we can be loved by and love the Holy Spirit just as we love and are loved

by Jesus, Son of the living God. The Holy Spirit is the person of God with us here today. 'It is one thing to know God is love, but quite something else to know we are loved by God' (from a sermon by C. Thomas Hilton in "Dynamic Preaching," April-June 2000, Page 76).

Gordon Brownville in "Symbols of the Holy Spirit" tells the story of the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen. Amundsen was the first person to discover the location of the magnetic north pole. And in 1911 he was the first person to reach the South Pole. On one of his long sailing trips north he took

a homing pigeon with him, and when he reached the magnetic North Pole he released the bird. His wife was surely overjoyed when she saw the pigeon circling above her home in Norway and she realized her husband was still alive. We will be enabled to do great things by the mighty and powerful Spirit.

Amen.

“Breathe on Me, Breath of God”

Description: The Holy Spirit is breathed on the disciples to empower them as Jesus’

Ascension is imminent. In turn, the

disciples empower the church to act in

Christ’s physical absence but with

knowledge of his ever-present Spirit with us.

Tags: Holy, Spirit, Jesus, Christ, God,
oldest, festival, church, harvest, Meister,
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