

Jesse Perkins  
Friday, May 21, 2021  
Year B Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2:1-21  
Romans 8:22-27  
John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

## “The Power of Breath”

- My preaching imagination this week has been full of images about wind.
  - I guess that is the hazard of preaching on Pentecost Sunday, right?
  - I think about all the ways that wind is life-giving, and life threatening.
  - I remembered a time when, as you all know me and the truth that I am a beach bum
  - I remember a time when we were on one of our yearly pilgrimages to the gulf coast
    - And a storm was brewing offshore
  - It was threatening to become a hurricane before making landfall, and we were staying in a condo right on the beach
  - The building maintenance crew began making their rounds, securing balcony furniture to the railing to prevent it from blowing away
  - And we all just watched as the waves got bigger, the rain came, and of course- the wind hit
  - Fortunately, it did not grow into a hurricane, but stayed a tropical storm, and you guessed it:
  - We were standing out in the balcony with big grins on our faces as we felt what was in reality a small storm
  - But what felt like enough that it could blow you off the balcony at any minute.
  - Just imagine what a bigger storm might feel like- wind blowing your hair uncontrollably, pressing your clothes against you,
  - Almost preventing you from walking into it, or blowing you over completely
  - There is a moment of awe there, in admiring the small demonstration of the power of the wind, and knowing it can do so much more
  - I think of more things: wind driving sail boats, wind breaking trees and fences- we have had a little bit of that this year
  - And if you think the wind breaking trees is something, I assure you that breaking wind in the wrong situation is just a damaging.
    - Almost as much damage as mentioning it in a sermon... !
    - I'm sorry I couldn't help myself- back to it

- Of course, I think about Pentecost- about the bones, about creation and life,
- And of course the disciples experiences that are now our experiences, for we are now the disciples-
  - that's you and me- the heirs of that small, eventually fearless group
- Who directly experienced the power of the breath- the wind- of God
- At the last minute, I asked Pam to change the bulletin for today to include the Ezekiel reading
  - We get a choice on Pentecost Sunday which readings to include, and at the last minute I realized that valley of the dry bones is just too powerful to miss
  - God over and over again uses breath as a sacrament, a symbol, of the divine work in the world
  - From the very start, God "breathed" life into Adam in the garden of Eden
  - And God instructs the prophet to "prophesy," to dare to announce a reality that seems impossible
  - But the prophet did it- the prophet prophesied to the bones, he dared to follow God and by his breathe instructed the bones to live again
  - And they did- God did it again and put living breath into dead and dry bones, renewing them
  - This was God's message to the people of Israel- scattered and exiled,
  - Their nation no more alive than those corpses in that mass grave the prophet is shown
  - But they will breathe again- breathe with God's wind
  - In Hebrew, she is called Ruach<sup>1</sup> (Ru-agghhh)
    - It can mean breath as through the mouth and nostrils
    - It Strong's Concordance also says it can be translated air, anger, blast, courage, temper, wrath, wind, and windy
    - It, like the wind we experience, can range in intensity and purpose
  - And of course throughout the Old Testament she is seen as the symbol of life itself
  - I am reminded of the test that doctors used to do prior to modern medicine
  - Where they would hold up a mirror to a deceased person and use it as a verification that the person was in fact completely dead
  - Rather than just unconscious, the cold mirror would produce condensation if the person breathed at all...

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<sup>1</sup> <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/7307.htm>

- And ideally it would prevent them from accidentally burying someone alive
- If you ever want proof that God loves life, take a look at the holy symbols we have used with our worship for thousands of years
  - Water
  - Fire
  - Bread, wine
  - And breath.
  - All of the things we need to live- and live abundantly.
- But this Pentecost Sunday, what we are really hear to learn about is our forbearers in the faith who experienced that breath on the first Pentecost
  - It is the only church holiday that scripture itself names, as Acts 2:1 says, when the day of Pentecost had come.
  - The ancient Christians were already celebrating this day with its Proper Noun before the New Testament was written down
  - The disciples experienced the breath of God like those dry bones did, in a circumstance that was very similar
  - They too were dried out and not moving... hiding and waiting in that upper room
  - And then the Spirit came- it showed up in tongues of fire on their heads, and lit a fire under them
  - It gave them new life, new purpose, new meaning as God restored them to wholeness and brought them out of their dry valley
  - But upon being invigorated, they were blown out into the street and Peter spontaneously begins preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ
  - That God raised him from the dead, offers us salvation and a new Kingdom in which to live and serve
    - And wants us to continue the work
  - And what I see right now, the particular gift of the Spirit that I covet for our world today
  - The ability to understand.
  - The ability to speak in tongues... to hear and speak in a way that can be truly heard
  - Come Holy Spirit- we need that today
- It is here that I believe you and I can come into the picture this Pentecost
  - As I mentioned- heirs to the fire, water, the Spirit- and the breathe of God
  - Coworkers with that Spirit at times, and at other times blown around by it to where we need to be, and what we need to do

- We are blown out into the world, out of our upper rooms, those places where we are safe and surrounded by people like us
- We are blown out of our favorite news station and homogenous friends list on social media
- Into a great and diverse world
- We are driven, empowered, given marching orders <sup>2</sup>
- Yes, to go and work for God's kingdom, to preach and work for justice, mercy- to fight the good fight
- That's why we use the ladybugs- they do that
  - Not only are they Pentecost red
  - They bravely crawl out into the unknown and begin working to change a garden for the better
  - They are capable of eating 50-60 aphids in one day, keeping those harmful insects from hurting your plants
  - They have been to outer space- they were able to survive even in microgravity settings
  - Resilient, adaptable, and a force for good
  - They may not be a traditional symbol yet... yet(!), but that sums up Pentecost pretty well
- But as we work for good in the garden God plants us
- We also have the imperative of the Holy Spirit to seek to understand
- For understanding and being understood is the beginning of sympathy, mercy and grace, and even forgiveness
- As I read the blogs, read and watch the news, I observe that as a country are already invigorated and ready to fight
- Our fellow citizens have taken up arms, both literally with guns this past January
  - And also figuratively with our keyboards
- And we are ready, if not looking for, a place to fight and an enemy to fight
- How different it could be if we also embraced the power of the Spirit to hear and speak, and did we were armed with compassion and grace even as we worked for God's justice and peace
- Recently I had a fantastic conversation with someone who was looking at the death of Jesus Christ, and asking million dollar question:
  - Why did Jesus have to die? Did God require Jesus' death?
  - Now this is a little detour, I know it's not Good Friday... but stay with me and I'm going to come back to it

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<sup>2</sup> PulpitFiction, <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/pentecostb>, 2018

- There are many many theologians over the millennia who have tackled this question, and many different theories on it
- I believe that what forced Jesus to die was not God, but human's propensity to preserve power at the expense of life
- And humanity's favorite go-to mechanism of picking a scapegoat to blame and punish instead of looking at our own sins
- Jesus had to die because he was not going to stop preaching about a loving God that is available to all- and loves all, and the worth of all
- And humanity was going to single him out and blame him in order to stop him
  - Because that is what we do so easily and quickly, when we don't like something
- It may be our original sin- that we unite most easily when we have a common adversary,
  - And and we go after the thing that makes us uncomfortable
- That all to say, this is not God's way, that is not the way of love, or the way of Jesus
- It is the Gospel Message whether you are on Good Friday, Easter Sunday or Pentecost!
- That is what we are called out of- that is our upper room entrapping us
- Instead, the Holy Spirit pushes out out into a big, diverse world to love, to improve, and to speak and hear
- Not creating a straw man to blame and punish, no scapegoating allowed in God's kingdom
- It is all the message of Pentecost- all of what we need to hear
  - Not only were the disciples given new life through the breath, the same breath of God that has been breathing life since the beginning of time
  - Not only were they invigorated and literally blown out of the room as though a hurricane had suddenly developed within the walls
  - But they were empowered to do their work with understanding, with compassion to the great diversity of Jews that heard them that day
  - As inheritors of this great gift that day, the tools we use to work for God's justice and peace are just as important as the goals
  - I assure you, if you start listening and caring even about the people you think are the problem- if you can show compassion even as you challenge them
  - The world will think you have gone mad- drunk with new wine- because we are all fed a constant diet of fear and urgency to combat an "enemy"

- It is a constant pressure to buy into the idea that there is always an “us versus them”
- But that is not the work of the Holy Spirit
- The work of the Holy Spirit, and our work today, is to break free of the sin, the tendency we have, to create enemies out of people
- To speak, to hear, to love, and to bring them along in the work for God’s Kingdom
- The Holy Spirit sends us out with understanding and purpose- God’s kingdom is incomplete without every one God has created!
- There is no us and them- we are all beloved children of God whom God is desperately trying to reach and to love and to save
- Breathe on us, breath of God- light a fire over us and under us
- Push us out of our upper rooms of distrust and tendencies to blame and create enemies
- And out into the world of compassion and understanding, and a work for your peace and justice.
- And to bring everyone into your new way of life, of being, of loving
- Show us the power of Breath.

Amen.