

Two Pentecosts¹
Acts 2:1-27, John 20:19-23
First Presbyterian Church
May 31, 2020
Pentecost Sunday

John 20:19-22

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.”

Acts 2:1-21

²When the day of Pentecost had come; they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

¹⁴But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷‘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. ¹⁸Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.

¹ This sermon adapts but follows closely “God’s Breath,” a sermon by Barbara Brown Taylor, published in the Pentecost 2003 edition of *Journal for Preachers*, p. 37-40.

¹⁹And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. ²⁰The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. ²¹Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Sermon

For many of us North American Christians, today is the third biggest day of the Christian year. Right behind Christmas, which is right behind Easter, there is the day of Pentecost when a mighty wind blew through a house somewhere in Jerusalem and Jesus' disciples were given everything, they needed to turn the world upside down. They didn't need a building... they didn't need a stewardship program... they didn't need a seminary-trained preacher... they didn't even need committees. All they needed was Spirit... Holy Spirit... God's own breath... and that's precisely what they got.

Now, I thought I might start out this morning by explaining WHY this day runs such a distant third to the other two... but the truth is, I would only be guessing. All I know is we have Christmas pageants and Easter parades, but no Pentecost festivals. I don't know anyone (including me) who invites the whole family over for Pentecost dinner. And if Hallmark has a line of Pentecost cards, I have yet to see them.

But, let me tell you if you and I were there that day 2,000 years ago... if you and I were there among Jesus' followers in Jerusalem that day... we would have known almost nothing about Christmas. And Easter... the resurrection of Jesus from the dead... could quite possibly be a memory that was already starting to fade from our minds. But TODAY... Pentecost... well, for you I, today would have been BIG! Because TODAY we would know beyond a shadow of a doubt that he had kept his promise to not leave us alone. Because TODAY we would be filled with the same Holy Spirit that had filled him. If we were among his first followers in Jerusalem, TODAY... we would receive all the inspiration and power we would ever need to carry on in his name. TODAY was big for Jesus' first followers and it's because of them... it's because they offered themselves to receive and bear the fruit of that Spirit, that the day of Pentecost is often celebrated as the BIRTHDAY of the church. All around the world today – (even though most Christians cannot be together in one place) ... all around the world people are saying, "Happy Birthday, Church!" And just like when we celebrate someone's birthday, we sometimes tell stories about the day on which they were born, so today we are telling important Bible stories about the birth of the church... about how this all came to be.

Those who study the history and culture of individual congregations have discovered that churches have an almost primordial memory of their own birth... and that if you want to understand why a church is the way it is... if you want to know why a church has a certain personality... then it's worth exploring how that church began. If, for example, a particular church was founded to OPPOSE something – let's say, doctrinal error – then you can bet that maintaining doctrinal purity will be a part of that church's culture going forward. Yet, if a church was born to EMBRACE something – let's say a concern for the people and needs of its surrounding community – then you can expect that stories of compassion and reaching out will be passed down from generation to generation.

Well, as we've already said – what's so interesting about the church's birth story is that the Bible actually gives us two of them. One is told by John... the other is told by Luke... and this morning we will briefly encounter both of them. John's story takes place the evening of the first Easter. The eleven disciples are absolutely terrified because of all that has happened the past couple of days... so, they are "self-quarantined" for fear of the Jews... they are "locked down" inside a house somewhere in Jerusalem. Of course, that was no longer a problem for Jesus – he no longer needed doors and windows... so John says simply, he came and stood among them. "Peace be with you," he said... as he showed them his identifying marks - his hands and his side – and they rejoiced when they saw it was him. He said again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And then he did something very mystical and frankly, a little creepy – but something none of them would ever forget – he opened his mouth and he breathed on them. And as his breath filled the room, he said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." That's how it happened, according to John – in an intimate gathering... and with a gentle breath. The danger that comes with this Gentle Breath birth story is that when it is told again and again, some churches come to believe that since he breathed on them the Spirit sort of belonged to them... that they have it and others do not. And then, sometimes they find they like the intimacy of their little group so much... that they like being breathed on so much... that they stay right where they are praising God for the gentle breeze... but never unlocking the door. John's "Gentle Breath" birth story of the church is very important – there is an intimacy with the Lord that we long for... it assures us that the Spirit of Christ abides with us and teaches us and gives us peace and is with us forever.² But it is not the only one in the Bible.

Luke has a different story... a different kind of story... and we realize this right from the get-go. The disciples are still in the house – Luke and John agree on that – but Luke's story takes place fifty days after Easter (rather than Easter evening) ... and there are about 120 people there, instead of eleven. In Luke, the doors and windows are wide open... Because the last thing Jesus had said to them was, "Stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high," So, the disciples wait for something to come in from the outside... and while they don't have a clue what it might look like, they've got all the doors and windows wide open to welcome whatever IT is.

Well, on the day of Pentecost, "IT" turns out to be something so utterly mind-blowing that even Luke struggles to describe it. Barbara Brown Taylor writes this: "It starts out with a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it fills the house where Jesus' followers are sitting. Then it bursts into tongues like flames above their heads, but when they open their mouths to shout, 'Watch out! Your head is on fire!' that is not what comes out. IT comes out instead, speaking languages none of those Galileans every learned, so that perfect strangers from the four corners of the world have to tell them it is God they are talking about – God and God's deeds of power – the latest of which is now featuring them, behaving so bizarrely under the power of God's spirit that the only thing some bystanders can come up with is DRUNK."³

² Fred Craddock suggests that for us to understand what receiving the Holy Spirit meant in the Johannine community we must read chapters 14-16.

³ Taylor, p. 39.

But Peter says, “No... it’s only nine in the morning,” meaning what exactly? Check back again in the afternoon and we may be? But then, the Spirit just grabbed hold of Peter and gave him a sermon like he never had before. His text that morning was an old vision from the prophet Joel who, hundreds of years before, had imagined days just like this one - days when God’s Spirit would be poured out upon ALL flesh – not just on chosen people, not just on eleven male people, not just church-going people – but ALL people. And Peter says it’s starting to come true – this vision of God’s noisy, fiery, untamed Spirit set loose in the world.

Again, this is an alternative birth story for the church... which leads to an alternative kind of church – not a Gentle Breath congregation, but a Violent Wind congregation – where the Spirit blows not only INTO the room, but OUT of it – through every door and window and crack it can find. Members of Violent Wind congregations know they do not possess or control or need to guard the Spirit. Instead they count on the Spirit to blow them out the door and then to guide them as they go into the world in search of the places where God is already at work. Which, by the way, is absolutely anywhere – that’s how free God’s Spirit is – in a peaceful protest against police brutality, in a gathering of folks who are recovering, at a Habitat building site or a hospital’s ICU, around the family supper table... anywhere that lives are being changed by that wind... anywhere broken bodies and relationships are being healed anywhere people are leaning in the direction of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. ANYWHERE.

You know, it’s something we’ve always known... but now we know it in an entirely different way: church is not a building. Don’t get me wrong - I love this building... and I know you do too! I love this building and all the wonderful stuff that happens here... and I know you do, too! Still, one of the worst things we Christians have ever done is to equate “church” to a building, or to reduce church to a particular group of people... or to define church as the things those people do when they are meeting inside that building. The truth is... at least one of the truths I am learning as we are apart... it is that as different as John’s and Luke’s church birth stories are, what they share is a common understanding that only God makes a church... that church is really whoever and wherever God’s people are bound together in the Spirit of Christ – which means it doesn’t have to have a sign out front... a Sunday school... a parking lot... a seminary-trained preacher. Though those things certainly may help, yet all a church has to have is Spirit... Holy Spirit... God’s own breath... whether that breath comes as gently as a sigh or so violently it blows you out the door. And the lucky churches are the ones that get both.