

Just Breathe

May 11, 2008 | Pentecost Sunday Year A

Lectionary citations

Num 11:24-30

Ps 104:24-34, 35b

Acts 2:1-21

John 20:19-23

First came the waiting. After being with them for 40 days after Easter, the risen Jesus told them, “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” Then he left them to be with the Father, promising to return at the end of the age. During those few days, about a week, they waited and prayed. As Acts describes it, “They went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.” When Peter gathered the believers together, they numbered about 120. They cast lots and selected Matthais to replace Judas as one of the 12. Then, they waited.

Fifty days after Passover came the festival of Pentecost, the Festival of Weeks. This festival celebrated the end of the wheat harvest and all believing Jews wanted to come to Jerusalem to sacrifice the first fruits of the harvest—new grain, yeast bread, lambs, and bulls—to the Lord. The Law required, “On that same day you are to proclaim a sacred assembly and do no regular work. This is to be a lasting ordinance for the generations to come, wherever you live.” For hundreds of years, the Jewish people had

been scattered to the lands around the Mediterranean Sea, living their lives among the gentiles and learning their languages. However, Jerusalem was still the center of their world and only the priests at the Temple could perform the required sacrifices. There were synagogues throughout the world where Jews read the Law. However, there was only one Temple, the Temple of Jerusalem, where they could properly sacrifice and celebrate. Therefore, they came from throughout the known world to celebrate joyfully God's generous bounty.

The disciples—probably the 120 earlier mentioned—gathered in a house, perhaps the house of the upper room—at 9 AM, perhaps for a prayer breakfast, and something extraordinary happened. The Church, the Body of Christ was born. Jesus had delivered on his promise of the Holy Spirit. They now had the power to be Jesus' "witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

The Holy Spirit had been abroad since before the creation of the World, when the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. The Spirit is the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets. In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit is always a wind, sometimes a gentle breeze, sometimes a raging storm, the very breath of God. In our Old Testament reading, the Spirit "rested" upon the elders of Israel, and they prophesied. The Spirit gives life and energy and much more. The artisans who helped Moses make the tabernacle were filled "with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills." When Israel needed a deliverer, "the Spirit of the LORD came on Othniel, so that he became Israel's judge and went to war." When "the Spirit of the LORD came on Gideon . . . he blew a trumpet."

When Samson was attacked by a lion, “The Spirit of the LORD came on him in power so that he tore the lion apart with his bare hands as he might have torn a young goat.” After Saul was anointed the first King of the Jews, the prophet Samuel told him to join a procession of prophets, “The Spirit of the LORD will come on you in power, and you will prophesy with them; and *you will be changed into a different person*. Once these signs are fulfilled, do whatever your hand finds to do, for God is with you.” From the start to the end of the Old Testament, the Spirit of God is constantly present, empowering God’s chosen servants to create, fight, prophesy, and rule.

In our study of the Gospel of Luke, we are learning how the life and ministry of Jesus fulfill the promises of the Old Testament. Luke emphasizes how the Holy Spirit continues to empower God’s people to prophesy—in the first chapter of Luke alone, the Angel Gabriel tells Zechariah that his son, John the Baptist will be filled with the Holy Spirit, and tells Mary that she will conceive a child, Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit. When Mary and Elizabeth meet, they are filled with the Holy Spirit, and they pray and prophesize.

When discussing the Trinity, we all need to remember that there is one God, not three Gods. We believe in one God. The three persons of the Trinity have one being. However, although the Trinity is mysterious and difficult to explain, it is not an illusion or a metaphor. Through Jesus Christ the true nature of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is revealed to us. The Trinity is the truth about God, and when we stay with this mysterious Truth, our experience of God is deepened and enriched. The Holy Spirit is important because it focuses us on experiencing God inside of ourselves, but not as something that we own or have created. The Holy Spirit goes where it wills and what it

gives, it gives freely. The gifts of the Spirit are never earned, they are pure unmerited grace. The Holy Spirit gives us the power to do God's will in our lives in ways that we alone could never accomplish. The Spirit is God working inside of us, empowering us to do God's work through the Church. The Spirit changes us, makes us more like Christ, so that we can better serve the Body of Christ.

When the Holy Spirit was audible and visible at Pentecost, it was given not to any individual, but to the entire community of believers. The gift of the Spirit from the Father through the Son is to the Church, the Body of Christ. Just as Jesus had chosen his disciples, he made his disciples into the Church by the gift of the Spirit. All the disciples had to do was to remain in Jerusalem and wait. As Paul says in today's Epistle, all the gifts of the Spirit "are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses." Authentic gifts of the Spirit always empower individuals to build up the Body of Christ. As Paul says, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

As a preacher, I am naturally pleased that the first gift of the Spirit to the church was the gift to preach "about God's deeds of power." On that one day, the Spirit allowed the hearers to understand the Word of God in the own native languages. This apparently happened only on that one day, just as happened to the elders of Israel in our Old Testament reading, "When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied—but did not do so again." However, the message of the Spirit came across loud and clear, to preach the Word of God in all languages. The movement of the Holy Spirit that began on Pentecost has resulted in at least one book of the Bible being translated into around 2,400 languages. An estimated 2,000 language communities have not yet received even one

verse of God's Word in their native language. One group, Wycliffe International and its partner organizations have a goal, "by 2025, to see a Bible translation program in progress in every language needing one."

The second gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church was the gift of baptism with the Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost, Peter told the crowd, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and *for all who are far off*—for all whom the Lord our God will call."

The association between the Holy Spirit and Baptism begins quite early in the Gospel of Luke. John the Baptist predicts that Jesus "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." The visual presence of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is foreshadowed at Jesus' baptism, "Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Through Jesus' prayer, the presence to God in Baptism—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is clear.

Jesus gave a new baptism to the Church on Pentecost. The power of this baptism by water and the Holy Spirit is the power to make any person a member of the Body of Christ, a part of God's church. Sometimes we get so caught up in the rush of wind and the tongues of flame that we forget the most important outcome of the day: After Peter preached, "Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day." The Church was no longer just those who had met Jesus of Nazareth and treasured his memory. It was a living, breathing, growing body, full of the power and glory of God and ready to spread the Good News and the baptism

by water and the Holy Spirit to all nations of the earth. That body is still alive today and we are its members.

Take a deep breath and feel the Spirit in you. As Paul says in today's reading, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." Amen.

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