

THE BREATH OF GOD

A Sermon by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Acts 2:1-6, 38-41
John 20:29-23

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No matter how you and I choose to celebrate or not celebrate them, birthdays come around year after year for each one of us. As an adult, my yearly birthday is most often low-key and quiet; it's a day not much different from every other day except for the happy birthday wishes I receive. Even this year when I hit the significant number of 65, it was a basically typical day. Tomorrow, Peter turns 66, and we are doing what we usually do on Mondays. We are going to get some work done at the house we bought in Canfield. I suppose it's a bit different than a typical Monday because with it being a holiday we are not needed to babysit the grandkids. But don't worry, I told him that after our day of housework I would treat him to dinner at a restaurant to celebrate his birthday. But the truth is, we typically end our days in Canfield by stopping someplace to eat on our way back to Chagrin Falls.

Of course, what I just described as a typical birthday for Peter and myself is not even close to how our grandchildren's birthdays are celebrated. The annual August birthday bash party for all three grandchildren whose birthdays are in August is a big event that involves lots of planning and preparation. The event is a noisy one with family and friends and lots of kids running around. The grandkids used to each have their own birthday cake, but these past couple of years it's a container of DQ ice cream, because they mostly just eat the ice cream. And when it comes to gifts, there are so many. Clearly, there are different ways of celebrating birthdays – a quiet dinner out, a small cake shared among immediate family, or a large gathering of extended family and friends. But whether small or big, quiet or noisy, birthdays are days that are meant to be remembered and acknowledged.

If you're wondering why I'm talking so much about birthdays today, it's because today is Pentecost, the birthday of the Church. Sometimes on Pentecost, like last year, we have lots of balloons decorating this chancel area as well as birthday cake at our fellowship time following worship. Last year was like a big party as many of us showed up to welcome and celebrate our class of confirmands becoming members of the church. But this year is different. It's still Pentecost, but it also happens to be a holiday weekend and Blossom time in Chagrin Falls. We hung the banner, but there are no balloons and no cake to eat following worship. Clearly, attendance is significantly lower and the party atmosphere is missing. Today is still the birthday of the church, but our celebration is more low-key and quieter than last year. But that's okay, because there is not just one way to celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birthday of the church.

In the New Testament, there are two very different accounts of Pentecost. One is a loud, large and motivational celebration, but the other is small, quiet and reassuring. Luke is the host at the large and loud celebration of the church's

birth and John is the host at the quiet and small celebration. Luke's account is described in the second chapter of Acts and is the one with which we are most familiar. It's not unusual that we would better remember and focus on the bigger party as the years pass by. Luke's Pentecost party takes place in Jerusalem. About 120 people were present when the party began. *"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"* (Acts 2:2-4). There was so much noise and commotion that it got the attention of people out in the streets. Simon Peter stood up to preach about Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit as the fulfilment of prophecy. It must have been quite an event as well as message, because three thousand people confessed faith in Christ and were baptized that day. It was a big, noisy and spectacular event.

This description from Luke seems to reflect Exodus 20 in the Old Testament. In the Jewish tradition, Pentecost celebrates God's giving of the law. Luke's description of God giving the Holy Spirit is similar to the giving of the Ten Commandments. In Exodus 20 the people had left Egypt and were before the mountain of God, Mount Sinai. It was an unusual day with *"thunder and lighting, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking"* (Exodus 20:18). In response to the strange conditions, the people *"were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance"* (Exodus 20:18). They told Moses to go up on the mountain and to find out what God wanted and then to come back and tell them. So, Moses went up the mountain where there was darkness, wind and fire. It was a dramatic event that continues to be remembered and celebrated among the Jewish community of faith just like Luke's dramatic Pentecost event continues to be remembered and celebrated among the Christian community of faith.

But the other Pentecost celebration is quiet. It also takes place in a house in Jerusalem, but it involves a much smaller group of disciples. Jesus had been crucified and buried, and the disciples are scared and wondering what is going to happen to them, so out of fear they had locked the door, but suddenly Jesus was with them. He said, *"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you"* (John 20:21). And then we are told that Jesus simply breathed on them. In this story, there is no violent wind or flames, there is only Jesus' breath and the words, *"Receive the Holy Spirit"* (John 20:22).

This small-scale, quieter event is also a receiving of the Holy Spirit, a Pentecost experience, but instead of it being a dramatic event, John describes it in the light of the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2. In those chapters of Genesis God created the heavens and the earth, the land, the sea, all vegetation as well as the great diversity of sea creatures, air creatures, and land creatures. God imagined and created a plethora of creatures, and then, as God's last act of creating, God said, *"Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness... So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them"* (Genesis 1:26-27). And then, *"The Lord God...breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became"*

a living being" (Genesis 2:7). God's breath brings to life a creature that is meant to think and act in ways that reveal God's presence to the rest of creation.

What if God had not imparted God's very own Spirit to his human creation? Well, I assume humans would be much more like other animals. Which means our entire lives would be devoted to eating, drinking, sleeping, eliminating, procreating – basically looking out for ourselves and then dying. But instead, God took his human creature, and he held it as a mother holds a baby, and as God breathed his human creature was filled with the living spirit of God. And God said, "This one is like me. Yes, I enjoy watching the birds, and I am amazed by elephants, and I do so like those horses, but the one that is most like me is this one because I have breathed my own Spirit into this one. Spirit-filled human beings are not content with simply eating and drinking, working and producing, relaxing and playing, showing off and being flattered, because our spirit-directed longing for God does not allow us to be content with such a life.

Therefore, we search for God's truth – we write poetry, play music, and engage in art; we get our hands dirty for the sake of God's kingdom work. We walk and work until we are exhausted and we sacrifice sleep and possessions for the sake of caring for God's creation and helping other spirit-filled human beings. We read and pray and worship and spend time pondering those things beyond this life – like what does God's kingdom look like and what happens after we die and then live again. To be filled with God's Spirit is so extraordinary and wonderful that the most horrible thing imaginable would be for the breath of God, the Spirit of God, to be taken from us.

Centuries before Jesus, David was king of Israel. When David was king he went out and engaged in war and was very successful in killing and conquering. He came back to Jerusalem for some rest, and he saw a beautiful woman who was married to one of his soldiers. The soldier was away at war, and David slept with that man's wife. "Well, I am the king," he thought, "I can do what I want." He fathered a child with the woman, and then had her husband sent to the front lines to be killed. In response, God sent the prophet Nathan to confront King David because David had been acting more like an animal than a spirit-filled human being. And then David prayed, he said, *"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love... Create in me a clean heart, O God and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me..."* (Psalm 51:1,10-11). Amidst David's pleas for God's mercy, he expresses what he knows to be the worse of all fates, the loss of God's Spirit.

And so it is that the Son of God took a group of disciples with nothing remarkable about any of them. They were an odd bunch – most were fishermen, one a tax collector, another a militant – but Jesus breathed on them and said, *"Receive the Holy Spirit"* (John 20:22). In that house in Jerusalem, following Jesus' death and resurrection, the disciples received the Holy Spirit by way of Jesus' quiet, reassuring breath. A bit later, they would receive yet another dose of God's Spirit by way of wind and fire. A rather small group of Jesus followers became the church as they worshiped God, wrote scripture, prayed and did God's will. They became the church as God's Spirit led them to those who were

hurting. They became the church as they emptied their pockets and got to work helping hurting people by offering them food and clothing, by caring for them when they were sick, by building and repairing their homes, and by addressing various other needs. Who were those people? Who are these people? They are the people upon whom Christ has breathed

I cannot exactly explain the Spirit of God. But I know that in the Bible both the Hebrew and Greek words that are translated "spirit" are also translated as both "wind" and "breath." I also know that neither the wind or a breath can be seen, and yet their effects are seen and felt. Sometimes, God's Spirit comes gently like a breath, and at other times it comes forcefully like the wind of a storm. One day a great tree is standing tall and proud, and the next day it is cracked and bent over. It was the wind, of course. One day a man is standing proud and arrogant, bragging that he doesn't need anybody – he is strong and self-sufficient. But then something gets into him, and he is not the same man. One day a teenager is obsessed with the way she looks and what she is wearing. But then her friends suddenly see her filled with a different focus and purpose as she starts volunteering at a local food bank and tutoring a struggling student. One day, a woman unable to sleep, unable to function most days following the death of her husband is noticeably filled with a peace and sense of purpose that allows her to once again live. What do you think causes such changes? I think it's God's Spirit, and that Spirit continues to give birth to Christ's church in both small, unassuming ways and in big, flashy ways.

Luke gives us a loud, big-scale, and unforgettable Pentecost in the book of Acts. It's the big, dramatic version that we typically focus on when Pentecost rolls around each year. Sometimes, that is exactly the version that is called for and the Spirit that is experienced. But John gives us a quiet, but still unforgettable Pentecost with his description of Christ simply breathing upon his followers. Sometimes, that is exactly the version that is called for and the Spirit that is experienced. Whether noisy or quiet, whether dramatic or calm, when the Holy Spirit is received the experience is life-impacting. On this Pentecost Sunday, I invite you to let your closing prayer be the one we now stand and sing together, "Breathe on me, breath of God."