

God's Breath

Acts 2:1-27; John 14:8-17

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Although it seems to have escaped the notice of both church and culture, 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 on a back street in Jerusalem and gave Jesus' disciples everything they needed to turn the world upside down: not money, not institutional structure, not even ordained leadership but God's own breath, a.k.a. Holy Spirit, the most elusive and least typecast person of the Trinity, the muse and soul of Christ's church.

I thought I would start out this morning by explaining why this day runs such a distant third to the other two, but I don't *know* why. We have Christmas pageants and Easter parades, but where are the Pentecost festivals? If Hallmark has a line of Pentecost cards then I have not seen one yet, and I don't know anyone who invites the whole family over for Pentecost dinner. Like most of you, I'm not looking for anything else to do, but still—you have to wonder what is going on here.

All I can figure is that most of us are spooked by the Holy Spirit. Some of us are old enough to remember when we spoke of the Holy *Ghost*, which wasn't exactly what you wanted to think about right before you went to bed, while others have heard enough about what happens in spirit-filled churches to leave Pentecost to the Pentecostals.

Surely somewhere in the mix there is also the vague recollection that Pentecost is not as much about what God has done for us as what God wants us to do in the *world*, which isn't nearly as attractive to most of us. Today is the day when Jesus' disciples received the dubious good news that their bodies were about to take the place of his body in the world. The same Holy Spirit that had filled him was coming upon them too, so that they had all the power they needed to carry on in his name.

Because the disciples (like Mary before them) consented to bear the fruits of that Spirit, the day of Pentecost is often celebrated as the birthday of the church—not any particular church, but the whole body of believers who are united by God's breath and empowered by God's spirit. All around the world today, people are wearing fiery red clothes to church, reading parts of the service in foreign tongues or blowing out the candles on a cake in the fellowship hall that says, "Happy Birthday, Church!" in red frosting. They are also listening to stories from Holy Scripture about the origins of this day—very important stories, as it turns out, since how any of us is born can have a lot to do with who we turn out to be.

My first job straight out of seminary was typing 65 words a minute for a man named Jim Hopewell who taught church ministry at Candler School of Theology. He studied congregations the way some people study birds. He watched how they moved

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and what kinds of nests they built. He listened to the sounds they made and how they behaved toward one another. Among many other things, he discovered that every congregation bears a kind of primordial memory of its own birth, so that if you want to know why a certain church has a certain personality then it is worth finding out how that church began.

If a particular church was founded to oppose something, for instance, then you can bet that opposition will remain at least part of that church's stance toward the world. Likewise, if a church was born to embrace something, then you can expect to find that posture passed down from generation to generation. The stories that bring a family of faith into being are the stories the family continues to tell, so that they shape each new member as he or she arrives.

That is why I think it is so interesting that we have two very different birth stories to choose from this morning. One of them is told by John, whom many Christians consider the most spiritual of the four gospel writers, and one is told by Luke, who is the author of Acts. That they tell two different stories should not surprise anyone, since they wrote for different times and places and from different theologies as well, but if we are sometimes confused about what it means to be the church in the world then John and Luke are at least two reasons why.

In John's story, which happens on Easter evening, the eleven disciples are locked inside a house in Jerusalem. It may be the same house that they have slept in before without ever once getting up in the middle of the night to check the windows and doors. But as you may have noticed in your own homes, when someone who is usually there with you is no longer there with you, nighttime can take on new meaning in your mind. Open windows are no longer ways in for cool breezes but for sinister people who are up to no good, and unlocked doors might as well have signs on them that say, "Looking for someone to rob and kill? Let us make it easy for you." After a while your fear can become so suffocating that you forget it is *yours*. You locked yourself in and no one else can let you out, since you are the only one who has the key.

In the case of the frightened disciples, Jesus got in without a key. Whatever he was made of by then, he did not need doors and windows anymore. He simply "came," John says, and stood among them. "Peace be with you," he said. Then he showed them his ID—the wounds in his hands and his side—and peace *was* with them, as the word became flesh once again their sight.

Then he did something very creepy and mystical that none of them would ever forget. He commissioned them by breathing on them, opening his mouth and pouring what was inside of him into them so that their bangs blew and their eyelashes fluttered and they could smell where he had come from—not just Golgotha and Galilee, but way before that—back when the world itself was being born. Anyone standing there that evening with any memory at all could smell Eden on his breath: salt brine, river mud, calla lilies. They could feel their own lungs fill as they breathed in what he breathed out. What their fear had killed in them, his breath brought back to life. It was Genesis Redux, as they were created all over again by the power of the Spirit that was coming out of his mouth.

"Receive the Holy Spirit," Jesus said, and that was how it happened. With a gentle breath, he conferred his spirit on his disciples, who became the guardians of that spirit through the ministry of Christ's church. At least I *think* that is how I got the idea that the Holy Spirit belongs to the church. I hate to tell you how few of those ideas I really

examined while I was learning them, but according to this Gentle Breath story about the birth of the church, the church has received the Holy Spirit, the world has not, and it is the church's job to bring the Spirit into the world.

As you may imagine, a birth story like that creates a particular kind of church. Some of these Gentle Breath congregations have forgotten all about the "send" part of what Jesus said: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." They like being breathed on so much that they stay right where they are, clapping their hands and praising God for the breeze without ever unlocking the door. Others hear the "sent" part and take it seriously, but even if they walk out of church under a sign that says, "You are preparing to enter the mission field," all of the arrows eventually lead back inside the church. In these congregations, it is every member's job to go out into the world, find those who don't know anything about the Spirit, and bring them back inside the church so that they can meet God in person.

It is a very Johannine idea of church, and there may not be anything wrong with it, but it is not the only one in the Bible. Luke has a different idea, which shows up right away in his story of the church's birth. The disciples are still in a house, so he and John agree on that, although Luke's story takes place fifty days after Easter instead of the same day and there are about 120 people in the room instead of 11. The doors and windows aren't locked, either, because the people inside know they are waiting for something to come in from outside. According to Luke, the last thing Jesus said to them was, "Stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high," and while they don't have a clue what that might look like, they are waiting with all of the doors and windows open so that whatever *it* is can get in when it comes.

On the day of Pentecost, "it" turns out to be something even Luke has no words for. It starts with a sound like the rush of a violent wind, he says, and it fills the entire 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's on fire!" that is not what comes out. *It* comes out instead, speaking languages that none of those Galileans ever 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 paradigm some bystanders can come up with is *drunk*.

"They are filled with new wine," some sneer, but Peter says no. "It's only nine o'clock in the morning," he protests, meaning what? Check back again this afternoon? But then the spirit rescues Peter by giving him something to say, not in tongues this time but in plain speech. When he opens his mouth to speak, what comes out is an old prophecy from the Hebrew prophet Joel, who foresaw days just like this one when God's spirit would be poured out upon all flesh—not just chosen people, not just eleven male people, not just church people but *all* people—young and old, male and female, slave and free.

Peter's pronouncement of this prophecy on the day of Pentecost is the sign that it has begun to come true, and that everyone upon whom the Spirit has just poured is hereby recruited to spread the word: God's fiery, transforming spirit is loose in the world, and from this day forth the church's job is to fan it wherever it may be found.

Here, then, is an alternative birth story for an alternative kind of church—not a Gentle Breath congregation but a Violent Wind congregation—propelled more by

God's sneeze than God's breath?—where there is such a strong wind blowing toward the open doors of the church that people would have to lash themselves to the pews in order to stay inside. Sure, they come back one day in seven to rally, to rest and reflect, but then God's finger goes back under God's nose and it is back into the world again—not to bring the Spirit but to discover it in all of the surprising people upon whom it has been poured.

Members of Violent Wind congregations are under no illusion that they have what it takes to guard God's spirit. Instead, they count on the Spirit to guide them as they go out into the world in search of Holy Fire. They may find it absolutely anywhere—that's how free God is—in a picket line, at a Habitat building site, in the beauty parlor of a nursing home, around a family supper table.

How do they know when they have found it? Because wherever the Spirit is, there is heat and light. Because people's lives are being changed around that fire and because they are so excited about what is happening to them that they sound positively *sloshed*—only it's not new wine they are drunk on but a new pouring of God's spirit, so generous that it cannot be contained by any human institution.

One of the worst things that Christians have ever done is to reduce the word "church" to mean a building, or one group of people who meet inside that building, who generally belong to one denomination distinguished by something that separates them from other denominations, so that it becomes possible for members to speak of "our church" as opposed to "their church," and even to suppose that God sees things the same way. *Honey, I shrunk the church!*

As different as John's and Luke's church birth stories are, what they share is a common understanding that only God can spot a church. It doesn't have to have a sign out front, a Sunday school, a copy machine, or an adequate parking lot, although those things certainly may help. All it has to have are some people with a story about how their life together began, who know what it is like to be locked up, short of breath, *waiting* (for what they don't always know), and who also know what it is like to be revived by some mysterious, divine breath, whether it comes as gently as a sigh or so violently that it turns the furniture upside down.

If they are lucky, most churches get a dose of both before they are through, and while they may not know where the wind comes from or where it is going, they do know whom to thank, which is why God gave the church to the world: not to possess the Spirit but to serve the Spirit, wherever in the world the Spirit may be found.