

Pentecost: The Rushing Wind of the Spirit and Catching our Breath

Joel 2:27-28, Acts 2:1-21 *(printed at end of the sermon)*

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Spirit

Ruach in Hebrew

Same word for Breath

Same word for Wind

In the first biblical story of creation in book of Genesis, the Spirit the *Ruach* appears. The Hebrew scriptures consistently teach the distinct, creative agency of the Spirit of God over the cosmos and all that is in it, including humankind. Not only does the Spirit of God [*ruach*] create all things but sustains them. Genesis 1:2 we read *“Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, the ruach’elohim (Spirit, the Wind of the Holy) was hovering over the waters.”*

Genesis 2:7 - *Then YHWH God formed human of dirt from the ground, and breathed [epoch] into its nostrils the breath of life [ruach chayim]; and the human became a living being.”*

Ruach – Holy Breath, Spirit, Wind

Mark 1:9-11 *“Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit (Ruach, Pnema in Greek) descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Beloved. with you I am well pleased.’ At once the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness.”*

Acts 2:1-4 *When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And 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.*

Ruach – Spirit, Breath, Loud Rushing Wind

Where are we today in this story? We are not gathered together. We are waiting and longing to hear some good news. Will names be spoken in a language of love or of grief or loss? What sounds do we hear? Is it hard to catch our breath?

Ahmaud Arbery

George Floyd

1,000 names on NYT front page last week

100,000 dead

Pentecost is the noisiest of all Christian holy days—a party, sometimes called the “birthday of the church,” celebrated with red festive banners. We hear rushing wind, tongues of fire, and cacophonous crowds. We re-enact Acts 2 in multiple languages, reminding us that God sent all humankind a gift—the spirit with its promise of peace and the healing of the earth.

But this week,

A man, panting, running, and fighting for his life.

“I can’t breathe; I can’t breathe...” and, then, no breath.

A thousand names and one sentence obituaries in print take our breath away.

100,000 stopped breathing.

A celebration? No thank you. I have felt such sadness and grief and anger this week.

In a sermon written by Diana Butler Bass, she offers these powerful words:

I feel like we are being strangled, the life choked from us—disbelief, sorrow, fear, rage. Violence in the streets, jails, and cages at our border, targeting black and brown men, women, and children; a virus stalking us all, turning familiar comforts into threats. We are hunted and haunted by guns and germs, prejudice and plague. And the victims mount. Each with a name, many known, some known only to God. From a single name to the many to myriads, this unholy litany of grief. (1)

Pentecost is no party this year.

There is a single verse—1 Corinthians 12:13— that offers a deep reminder of the Spirit that is different than the wind on Pentecost.

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.

Pentecost is, of course, not only about birth and but baptism. And here, in First Corinthians, Paul speaks about what it means to be baptized and to live in the Spirit. We are in one Spirit, with one body, he insists. And then, in words that sound familiar—he reminds of that oneness, whether we are “Jews or Greeks, slaves or free,” we all drink the same Spirit.

That short clause echoes Paul’s other (and more extended) use of those words, found in an older letter, in Galatians 3:27-28 —

“As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female: for you are one in Christ Jesus.”

Galatians 3:27-28 has long been one of my favorite bits of Paul. The words have been referred to as Paul's finest writing, his best religious vision and poetry, and the lens through which the whole of Pauline theology should be read.

For centuries, Christians have drawn inspiration from them for causes of justice including abolition, economic reform, and women's rights. Galatians 3:28 is Paul's rallying cry to overcome divisions of race, class, and gender, poetically and theologically interwoven with baptism, proclaiming justice as heart of life in Christ. Like most readers, I have attributed their lyrical and political power to Paul.

However, New Testament scholar Stephen Patterson has recently offered a far more provocative understanding of the origin of these words. Paul, he insists, was not their author. Paul was quoting them from an older source. With close historical detail, ...Patterson argues that these words were the very first Christian creed. Paul was quoting an ancient liturgy dating from the earliest years of the Jesus movement, said by the first baptized, a credo that probably went something like this:

*For you are all children of God in the Spirit.
There is no Jew or Greek,
There is no slave or free,
There is no male and female;
For you are all one in the Spirit.*

This forgotten baptismal creed, with its powerful words, was perhaps shouted by some baptized on that very first day, the day of fire, wind, and water. (2)

This forgotten creed is a statement of convictions of the Jesus people. It is not a statement about God, or about the mysteries of Christ. It is about people and who they are, really. In baptism, they were committed to giving up old identities falsely acquired on the basis of baseless assumptions—Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female—and declared themselves to be children of God.

Of course, it is our "baseless assumptions" that made this week, these weeks, all the sorrows of human history, so unbearable. We may assume we are better or superior to some - smarter, more deserving - and that some people our society says are less than privileged, less than human. This is the baseless assumption.

Pentecost burns away those baseless assumptions in a fire from heaven. The Spirit incinerates our old identities—inherited status from our ancestors, our senses of innate superiority or inferiority, our privilege or poverty, freedom or bondage, the roles assigned to us by biology. Yet, this baptism leaves us not as ash. For the baptism of fire is followed by the more mundane one, the baptism of water. Fire is quickly followed by the flow, the pouring out of Spirit, the

living water. We are washed, refreshed, and remade. We drink of one Spirit and find a new identity: Child of God.

We are named, each with our individual names, and with that familial name: Child of God. We have names. We share a name. We are fully ourselves; we are fully one with each other. The ancient baptismal creed marked that new identity as neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. As Patterson points out, it proclaimed “a world in which...female slaves could be leaders of free men, where foreigners and native born stood with equal power and equal rights. ‘You are all one’ signifies solidarity.”

Our names are our individual beauty, uniqueness. And our Name is our solidarity.

Pentecost this year is not as much party as protest. To name is to mourn the loss of individuals with gifts and loves. But Pentecost calls us to take another step beyond our personal laments and to be found together in a shared name – child of God. In this relation, Pentecost emerges as human solidarity. We stand together, in the same family, the same name, with and for and (even) as victims of the violence sadly endemic in this broken world....A new human family has been born: sons and daughters dare to prophesy; old and young dream dreams; and slaves, men and women alike, announce God’s justice in the world. (3)

Ruach - Spirit, Wind, Breath - moving through all people, reminding us we are one.

Pastor Jodi Houge, from Minneapolis offered these words earlier this week.

The amount of time that we have all spent thinking about breath lately seems staggering.It's Pentecost this Sunday--and the Spirit blows so hard on those gathered that it feels like everything is coming apart. Perhaps it's time for some things to come apart?

We already have a virus that steals breath. And now, we are surrounded by images of a kneeling police officer squeezing the very breath out of a man named George Floyd. I keep thinking about breath and breathing and what it means as we reflect and pray in silence and alone and together and what small steps each of can take.

And as a person of faith, I believe that is holy work. That is the Spirit. That is God-breathed and will bring life. (4)

When God breathes into dust, life comes where there is no life. I want to join God in building a world where our belonging to God and each other is the lived reality.

We need to breathe and we need to lament. When we lament we bear the grief and don't turn away from it. Mourning upholds our shared humanity; it honors the ones who are lost. It keeps us connected to how things should be by bearing the pain that they are *not* that.

And when we lift the veil, we are willing to see the brokenness around us, the lies we may have absorbed and perpetuated. We come honestly to our hearts, so Holy Spirit can open us and transform us and ready us for the freedom and newness God wants to bring in us and through us. So today I am returning to breath. I'm lamenting and opening my eyes and heart. Be gentle with yourself and then be open.

Ruach, Holy Spirit, breathe life into the dust of us. Bring us your transforming wind and flame that we may remember we are deeply woven together as one human family, children of God.

Breathe on me, breath of God.

Fill me with life anew,

That I may love

what thou doest love,

and do what thou wouldst do.

Amen.

- 1) Diana Butler Bass, "Pentecost, Prejudice, and Pandemic," sermon 5/28/20, ChurchAnew.org
<https://churchanew.org/blog/2020/05/28/butlerbass3?fbclid=IwAR2IIG6HRLQDJspDVnxF7r6BE2Q6w9X7FFICtSxDumzs704AzpPonxhevDc>
- 2) Stephen Patterson, *The Forgotten Creed: Christianity's Original Struggle against Bigotry, Slavery, and Sexism* (Oxford, 2018), quotes from page 29.
- 3) Bass
- 4) As quoted by Rev. Kara Root, "Daily Devotion – Breath," 5/27/20, inthehereandnow blog
<https://kara-root.blogspot.com/2020/05/daily-devotion-may-26-i-will-send-brief.html>

Joel 2:27-28 (NRSV)

You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am your God and there is no other. And my people shall never again be put to shame.

Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.

Acts 2:1-11, 42-43 The Message

When the Feast of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Without warning there was a sound like a strong wind, gale force - no one could tell where it came from. It filled the whole building.

Then, like a wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks, and they started speaking in a number of different languages as the Spirit prompted them. There were many Jews staying in Jerusalem just then, devout pilgrims from all over the world.

When they heard the sound, they came on the run. Then when they heard, one after another, their own mother tongues being spoken, they were thunderstruck. They couldn't for the life of them figure out what was going on, and kept saying, "Aren't these all Galileans? How come we're hearing them talk in our various mother tongues?" "They're speaking our languages, describing God's mighty works!"

That day about three thousand took Peter at his word, were baptized and were signed up. They committed themselves to the teaching of the disciples, the life together, the breaking of bread, and the prayers.