



Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church
Connecting faith with everyday life

Sermon Archives

Date: June 4, 2017

Title: "Gentle Breath, Violent Sneeze"

Scripture: John 20: 19-23; Acts 1: 1-11

Description: Two stories of the Holy Spirit being given to the disciples, with startling differences. Yet both are life-giving breath from God.

Pentecost—it's the third biggest day of the year for Christians. Christmas is Number One, of course. Then Easter. Then today: Pentecost. Christmas—Jesus' birthday; Easter—Jesus' resurrection; 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 corporate financing, not even ordained clergy. On the first Pentecost, Jesus' followers were given God's own breath, a.k.a. Holy Spirit.

You're ready, right? You have your Pentecost decorations up and your Pentecost shopping done; you have your Pentecost dinner planned and had already begun to wonder how long your relatives are going to stay for Pentecost. Because Pentecost is such a big deal—to almost nobody, unless you have to prepare a sermon or an anthem in church!

We have Christmas pageants and Easter parades; why aren't there Pentecost parties or Pentecost proms? Maybe it's because Pentecost is about the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is just a little bit spooky. Some of us are old enough to remember when the Holy Spirit was called the Holy *Ghost*, which wasn't exactly what you taught your children right before you put them to bed. And some of you have seen documentaries about those "spirit-filled" churches in north Georgia who handle rattlesnakes during the offertory. Uh, let's leave Pentecost to the Pentecostals!

Christmas is about when the sweet little baby Jesus came into the world for us; Good Friday is when Jesus died for us; Easter is when he conquered death for us. So Pentecost—what did God do for us on Pentecost? Well, that's a problem. Pentecost is not just about what God has done for us as it is about what God wants us to do in the

world. Pentecost is the day when Jesus' followers received the good news that their bodies were about to take the place of his body in the world. Then God's Spirit came upon them that Pentecost day, specifically the *power* of Jesus' Spirit. That power gave them all they needed to carry on in Jesus' name.

Today is a celebration of when the followers of Jesus were changed from being the last of a dying breed into the first of generations and generations of Christians. Pentecost is a kind of birthday. It's a story of how something got started and how that start helped shape everything that has followed.

So it's interesting that there are actually two stories. Or two versions of the same story; you decide. One is told by Luke and the other by John. So if you sometimes get confused about why Christians don't all agree on what we should do or who we should be, this may be part of the reason.

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 worrying in the middle of the night whether somebody remembered to lock the windows and doors. But times have changed. 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 fear can become a kind of prison itself. 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. (Hmm...been that way ever since, Jesus showing up in the most surprising places.) 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 breathed on them, opening his mouth and pouring what was inside of him into them so that their beards 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 all over again, as they were created all over again by the power of what 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, and life was never the same for them and for the entire world.

It's a lovely story, but it isn't the only story. Luke has another version. 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 cheap wine," some sneer, but Peter says no. "It's only nine o' clock in the morning," he protests. What did he mean by that? Check back again this afternoon?

Whatever he means, it conveys that God's Spirit is on the loose. God's Spirit is poured out on everybody, not just Peter, James and John, not just the twelve apostles, not just church people—everybody, young and old, male and female, philosophical Greek and camel-riding Turk. So hold on to your hats and hang on for the ride!

This is not a Gentle Breath story, but a Violent Wind story and it produces Violent Wind churches. The Spirit isn't a comforting puff but a wild sneeze, and it might blow the doors off. Violent Wind people ride that wind like an untamed stallion as they go out into their world in search of Holy fire. They may find that Spirit absolutely anywhere— that's how free God is—in a homeless shelter, at a local laundromat, 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 rush of God's spirit, but it's so hard to maintain one's dignity when breathing this snort of a Spirit Savior.

As different as John's and Luke's church birth stories are, they both tell about what happens when God's breath blows through a group of people. It starts with people who know what it's like to be locked up, short of breath, waiting for something, though they don't know exactly what.

And then when that something comes, whether it comes as gently as a sigh or so violently that it turns the furniture upside down, it turns out to be the very breath of life.

If we're lucky, most people get a dose of both comforting sigh and blow-you-away sneeze as part of living out their faith. Both ways are God's ways of showing that, though the Christmas decorations have been put away back in storage and the Easter Honeybaked Ham has long been devoured, though Jesus has come and risen and returned to heaven, God's best shot with us is not over. God continues to come to us and be with us and drive us into crazy-wild adventures. Like the disciples on Pentecost, we ain't seen nothin' yet!

This sermon was inspired by, perhaps borrowed from "God's Breath", by Barbara Brown Taylor, which appeared in *Journal for Preachers*, January, 2003.