

SERMON: Breath of Life
TEXT: Acts 2:1-21

May 31, 2020

I have been looking forward to this day for at least a couple of weeks. I've been eager to see your faces again. I've been hoping for weather just like this. I've been excited to try something new and creative in celebration of Pentecost - the day the Holy Spirit was poured out on a gathering of believers and the church was born.

One of the things I often strive to do when planning worship for Pentecost is to make it a sensory experience. A way to see the tongues of fire, to hear the sound of the wind and to feel it blowing. I'm grateful that we can be outdoors where the wind is automatically provided for us - even if it's just a gentle breeze. It's a glorious day for a celebration.

But I must confess that my spirit of celebration has been severely dampened with the events in our country this week. I cannot, in good conscience, preach a sermon titled BREATH OF LIFE, while the last, desperate words of George Floyd still ring in my ears: "I can't breathe." Even worse - if it's possible - is the image

burned into my eyes of police officers calmly, coldly, callously, unflinchingly, unemotionally, and intentionally killing him.

It's happened before to black men. It's been happening for hundreds of years in this country. Six years ago, Eric Garner cried the same words multiple times before he died, choked to death by police. "I can't breathe." The list of names continues to grow of those who have been killed because of the color of their skin.

About two years ago, I led a study on the book, *Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race*, by Debby Irving. Most of the people who attended the class were white and were striving to understand the concept of white privilege and to learn how to be anti-racist. One woman, a teacher in a small town in southeast Missouri, shared what another teacher - a black man - told her about what life is like for him. He is from Memphis, and he goes home as often as he can. He told the other teacher that when he gets home, it's like he can breathe again. Think about that. He lives every day of his life feeling like he can't breathe. Because he's black. In the white world of rural Missouri. Both figuratively and also in many respects, literally, he can't breathe.

In the story of creation, on the sixth day, when God **breathed** life into the first human, that BREATH OF LIFE was *ruach* - the Hebrew word meaning breath, wind, or spirit.

On the first Easter, when the women found the tomb empty, the risen Jesus appeared in the room where his disciples were hiding. "Peace be with you," he said. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he **breathed** on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." The breath, the spirit, the source of life and creative energy are all expressed with the word, *pneuma*, in ancient Greek, the equivalent of the Hebrew *ruach*. With a greeting of peace and the BREATH OF LIFE, Jesus revitalized his despondent and frightened disciples with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Later, as we heard in the reading from Acts, a larger group of believers - including the eleven remaining original disciples - gathered once again in an upper room in Jerusalem. According to one theologian, they were waiting "for the manifestation of the promise Jesus made before [he ascended into heaven]. The promise was that the followers of Jesus would be baptized, not with water, but with the Holy Spirit. The baptism of the Holy Spirit would give the people power to be

witnesses of Jesus, in word or deed, in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Debra J. Mumford, www.workingpreacher.org, May 31, 2020)

The Holy Spirit is life, breath, energy, creativity, power. It is a gentle breeze that relieves our anxiety and calms our fears. At the same time, it is a violent wind that pushes and pulls and shakes us out of our apathy and complacency. On the day of Pentecost, every person in the room was filled with the Holy Spirit and given ability to speak in other languages.

Many of us know this part of the story well, as astonishing as it is, and also, perhaps because we've seen it demonstrated in worship. Suddenly people are able to speak in other languages. Not only that, but everyone understands what is being said. What we don't remember, unfortunately, is what was being talked about - even though it's right there in the text. They spoke about “God's deeds of power.”

God created the universe simply by saying, “Let there be.” Let there be light for the day and the night. Let there be land and water. Let there be vegetation. Let there be birds of the air, fish of the sea, creatures great and small. Let there be

humankind made in our image. And God called all of it GOOD. Every. Human. Being. God breathed life into all creation. God's deeds of power bring LIFE.

And God freed the Israelites. Liberated them from their life of slavery in Egypt. Freedom and liberation. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. God's deeds of power intended for all humankind. God's deeds of power bring FREEDOM.

And God so loved the whole world that he gave his only Son. Jesus loved us so that we could learn how to love one another. God's deeds of power are about LOVE.

And Jesus sacrificed himself to pay for sin - our sins, the sins of others, the sins of the world. Jesus died and was raised so that we might have life and have it abundantly. God's deeds of power promote FORGIVENESS.

The church was born for the purpose of witnessing to God's deeds of power and demonstrating God's deeds of power for LIFE, FREEDOM, FORGIVENESS,

AND LOVE. God poured out the Holy Spirit and breathed life into the church that we could be the Body of Christ in the world.

God's deeds of power are not mine and not yours to hoard or to control. But we are to be witnesses, to proclaim God's deeds, and to make them known to all people.

We are called to open ourselves - our eyes, our ears, our hearts, and our minds - to the Holy Spirit to fully receive this message. Let us fully embrace God's priorities of LIFE, FREEDOM, FORGIVENESS, AND LOVE. Let us be transformed by the Holy Spirit so that LIFE, FREEDOM, FORGIVENESS, AND LOVE become the defining characteristics of the church, of our faith, and of every aspect of our lives.

Inspired by the BREATH OF LIFE, may we learn to conquer hate with love. May we replace fear and mistrust with trust in God and confidence in God's ways. May the BREATH OF LIFE instill within us a peace that smothers violence, the peace that passes understanding. In celebration of the BREATH OF LIFE, may we

commit ourselves to the work of making sure every person of every race can breathe. To the glory of God! AMEN.