

The Revitalizing Spirit

Acts 2:1-21

Pentecost Sunday, (May 28) 2023

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*Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.*

-Gerard Manley Hopkins

The proof that God raised Jesus from the dead is not an empty tomb, but the full hearts of his transformed disciples. The crowning evidence that he lives is not a vacant grave, but a spirit-filled fellowship. Not a rolled-away stone, but a carried away church.

- Clarence Jordan

I remember my boyhood in West Texas during the fall of the year one of those days when it felt like summer would never end. It's hot, even muggy. The air is close. Every one is sluggish, lethargic, even the animals. Flies buzz, yellow jackets are swarming but nothing else seems to be moving. All of sudden there is movement and action – and I mean, all of a sudden. Cows starting mooing and heading to the barn. Chickens squawk and head to their coops. Horses start running and kicking up their heels, and you look to the northwest. You can see it coming: a norther.

You can see a blue-gray band across the horizon that is growing larger and coming closer. Below that is a band of brown, the dirt that is the front edge of the

wind. Change is coming. The yellow jacket wasps find shelter under the eaves of the house and the flies disappear. Old-timers are putting things away, latching doors, and tying down equipment. Then it hits: a wall of wind and dirt. At one moment it was still and muggy and the next the wind hits. Immediately you feel the cool and, in a few minutes, the cold. Sometimes the blowing dirt turns to mud as rain hits. In moments the mugginess and lethargy are blown away. The wind comes and you have a quick intake of breath! It's invigorating! It's revitalizing!

That's a picture of Pentecost.

Acts tells us that the disciples are waiting and praying. And waiting. Waiting – giving up power, giving up control. They have no power and they're waiting on God's power. They're gathered in a stifling hot room. You can almost hear the drops of sweat hitting the floor. Lethargy, despair, tiredness – how much longer can we do this? Jesus promised us the Spirit would come but now he's gone and nothing is happening. It's stifling.

Catholic Worker Dorothy Day used to say that sought to contribute to creating a society “where it was easier to be good.” Nowadays, I feel like our Governor and Lt. Governor, along with others like them in statehouses around the county and of course, in Washington, wish to create a society where it is easier to be bad.

The people in charge seem to *want* the world to be four degrees hotter by the end of the century, actively and aggressively hurting the planet. The heresy of White Christian nationalism touts the flag, God, and guns and calls it orthodoxy. Racism, antisemitism, and hate language toward LGBTQ+ are all on the rise. And now, they're censoring ideas, denying history, and telling us what can and cannot be taught.

The great German poet Heinrich Heine said in 1821, “Wherever they burn books, in the end will also burn human beings.” We haven’t started burning books yet, but we’re sure banning them. And it seems we’re banning human beings too.

This world is stifling and pressing down upon us all.

Meanwhile, Jesus tells us to wait and pray and then he leaves.

And Luke says, “Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a powerful 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). Luke goes on explaining that all sorts of people were gathered together, brown and yellow, black and white, as the children song says. Nations and ethnic groups and all types and kinds, tall and short, male and female, gay and straight and everyone was able to hear in their own language about God’s work. Everyone was amazed and perplexed, asking one another, “What does all this mean?” Some skeptics were nearby and dismissed the whole thing saying, “That’s just Austin Heights. They’re all drunk” (see Acts 2:5-13).

John Graves canoed down the Brazos River in 1957 for three weeks with no one else but his half-grown dachshund. He wrote about it in his classic 1960 book *Goodbye to a River*. Early in the trip he was about to give up and go home. It was overcast and rainy, he was wet and tired, and though it was early November it was hot. Around the next bend was a highway bridge where he knew he could get ashore and hitch a ride to a phone to call someone to come and pick him up. He wrote, “Except that just then, with the abrupt autumn changefulness that I’d just about quit believing in, a big wind blew up out of the southwest and cleaned the

clouds from the sky in a scudding line, and all of a sudden everything was the way it was supposed to be” (p. 44).

At Pentecost, suddenly everything was the way it was supposed to be. The big wind of God blew up and different kinds of people were able to listen and speak to one another in ways each understood. Walls and divisions were overcome. God was loose in the world! At Pentecost everyone was encouraged and became bold and brave. Hope spread like wild fire. There was a new revitalization – new life was breaking free.

In the Bible, wherever there is life the Spirit of God is present. And wherever the Spirit of God is present, life breaks forth. In the Bible, the Spirit is the life force. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *ruah* is used 377 times and it means everything from spirit to breath to wind to storm to fresh air to cloud, and more. Sometimes it is a gentle breeze and sometimes it is a powerful storm and other times it scares the hell out of everyone. In Genesis 1:2 the *ruach elohim*, the breath or wind of God overshadows or hovers or moves over the “darkness of the deep” beginning creation. It is interesting that Luke uses the Greek version of this same word in Luke 1:35 when he writes of Mary conceiving Jesus, saying that the Holy Spirit will hover or overshadow or move over Mary. The Spirit broods over creation and the Spirit broods over new creation.

Parenthetically, Gerard Manley Hopkins uses the same word in the climax of his famous sonnet, *God’s Grandeur: Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs/ Because the Holy Ghost over the bent/ World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.*

Sometimes the Spirit of God blows and shocks with newness and other times, the Spirit broods and mothers and gently breathes.

In Genesis 2 (v. 7) God formed the human from humus, from the earth and “breathed into the human’s nostrils the breath of life and the human came alive.” The Spirit is that intimate relationship where we share the very same ruah as God. Where we’re so close that we’re breathing each other’s breath.

Over in Exodus 14 and 15 it is the ruah of God, the wind of God that drives back the waters of the Red Sea so that the People of God can cross over on dry land because Pharaoh’s army is on their heels. And it is the same ruah in Ex. 15:8 and 10 where it says, “At the blast of God’s nostrils the water piled up, the floods stood up in a heap” and Moses says, “You [God] blew with your wind, the sea covered them; they [the Egyptians] sank like lead in mighty waters.”

It is the Spirit of God that allows all creation able to relate to God. The breath of life is God’s vivifying, revitalizing presence; all who live do so by the power of Spirit. God is the source of life not only in the beginning, but also in every breath that is drawn (Molly Marshall, *Joining the Dance*, p. 21-22). Theologian Sallie McFague says, “Our lives are enclosed by two breaths – our first when we emerge from our mother’s womb and our last when we ‘give up the ghost’ (spirit)” (*The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*, p. 143).

For the Bible, when we all live according to God’s shalom, God’s peace, justice and harmony, everything fits together. As John Graves said a moment ago, when everything is the way it was supposed to be, the Spirit or Wind of God brings rain and nourishment and sunlight to all of creation. The Spirit brings hope and vigor. When we act with justice and peace and love, when we love God, love each other, and love Creation and seek to live God’s way we are acting in and with the Spirit of the Living God.

Nothing is too great for God's Spirit and nothing is too small. For the biblical mind, the very air we breathe is not made up of inert oxygen and nitrogen molecules. It is alive. It's the Spirit. So, for example, there is a difference in how the traditional church in the West and the traditional church in the East understand the Eucharistic bread. For the Western church, the Roman Catholic Church and the Episcopal Church (and others), the bread used in the Eucharist (Holy Communion/the Lord's Supper) is unleavened. It's matzo bread based upon Matthew, Mark, and Luke's stories of the Last Supper Jesus had with his disciples on Passover. Therefore, they were observing the Jewish tradition of unleavened bread for Passover. However, the Eastern Orthodox Church uses leavened bread based on John. For John, the Last Supper was before Passover, because for John, Jesus himself is the Passover Lamb and Jesus was crucified on Passover. In John's story, Jesus and his disciples ate before Passover and, therefore, would have eaten bread that had risen. The fermenting action of bread rising creates bubbles of air. It is bread raised by the breath of the Spirit. The Eastern Orthodox say that it is "ensouled" bread. Bread with soul (see Michael S. Northcott in *Systematic Theology and Climate Change*, p. 58-59).

Those of us in the Free Church tradition have never paid much attention to these details but perhaps we should. Next Sunday, when George Patterson leads us in celebrating Holy Communion notice that we share leavened bread. So when we ingest the bread, we are ingesting the vivifying and revitalizing Spirit of God.

Do you see how both the Bible and the history of the church has understood the Spirit infusing all of creation? Even in how bread is made.

But when we sin and participate in sin. When we fail to practice the love of God and we are unjust, violent, destructive, and exploitative, we inhibit the work

of the Spirit, and we suffocate our planet and ourselves and others. We block the windpipe.

In 2014 Eric Garner, in Staten Island, NY said, “I can’t breathe!” eleven times on camera, as he was held in an illegal chokehold by police officers, with his hands cuffed behind his back. Eleven times, as he was on the ground, facedown, pleading, “I can’t breathe!”

The only response from the police officer was “F--- your breath!” In other words, the police were saying, “We don’t care if you choke.” And Garner suffocated to death.

Earlier this month Jordan Neely, a homeless man on a NY subway was put in a similar chokehold until he too suffocated to death.

In the Exodus story the people of God were slaves in Pharaoh’s Egyptian Empire and Pyramid Scheme. The Bible says that the Israelites “groaned” in their slavery under Pharaoh. They cried out to Pharaoh, “We can’t breathe!” But Pharaoh said, “I don’t care if you choke.” So they groaned to God, “We can’t breathe!” And it says, “God heard their groaning...God looked upon the Israelites, and God paid attention to them” (Exodus 1:23-25).

Moses said to Pharaoh, “Thus says the Lord God of Israel, ‘Let my people go, so that they may go three days out into the wilderness and worship the Lord God’” (Ex. 5:1-3). In other words, “Let my people have some breathing room. Let them worship the God who gives life and gives breath.”

The Apostle Paul says in Romans 8:22 that all of creation is groaning as if in labor awaiting God’s redemption. Or we could translate it, that all of creation is choking, suffocating, and screaming for God to save us. We’re choking the life and

breath out of creation. Creation is responding with groans and screams, storms and wind.

I think it is interesting John tells the story of the giving of the breath of God differently than Luke does here in Acts 2. John tells us in John 20 that on Easter evening the disciples were afraid and in shock, locked down and hiding in the upper room. Pilate and the power of the Roman Empire has just said to Jesus on the cross, “We don’t care if you choke.” But God raised Jesus from death and Jesus walked into the stuffy, locked-down room the disciples were in and breathed upon them. Just breathed. And in breathing Jesus gave them hope and reinvigorated them with the power of the Holy Spirit. They were choking but Christ Jesus gave them CPR, so they came alive as they were supposed to be in God’s intention.

Five or six years ago, SFA student Wesley Russell, who was attending church here, wrote a paper for Jane in which he quoted from the 2000 Tom Hanks movie *Cast Away*, which I then used in a sermon the next Sunday. Last week, Wesley, who is now married and a public-school teacher, responded to Jane’s Facebook post about my cancer, with the same quote.

It's the penultimate scene in the movie. Tom Hanks has been marooned alone on an island for four years but is finally rescued because he was able to make a sail and a boat, and a passing tanker picked him up. He makes his way home to his fiancé, Kelly, whose thoughts for her had kept him alive. He returns to discover that Kelly has married someone else, thinking the Tom Hanks character had died. Later, Hanks sits and reflects with his best friend. He says that on the island he figured that he was going to die, so rather than wait on it, he decided to just go ahead and kill himself. But the limb of the tree from which he was going to hang himself broke.

Hanks says that he realized: “I had power over nothing. And that’s when this feeling came over me like a warm blanket. I knew, somehow, that I had to stay alive. Somehow. *I had to keep breathing*. Even though there was no reason to hope. And all my logic said that I would never see this place again. So that’s what I did. I stayed alive. *I kept breathing*. And one day my logic was proven all wrong because the tide came in and gave me a sail. And now, here I am. I’m back. ... I’m talking to you. I have ice in my glass... And I’ve lost her all over again. I’m so sad that I don’t have Kelly. But I’m so grateful that she was with me on that island. And I know what I have to do now. *I gotta keep breathing*. Because tomorrow the sun will rise. Who knows what the tide could bring?”

Austin Heights, from cancer to climate change, from regressive politics to repressive economics logic tells us things are bad. But on this Pentecost morning, the gospel tells us that one day our logic will be proven wrong. Someday all will be as it is supposed to be. Our job is to keep breathing. Who knows what the tide could bring? Who knows what the wind will blow?

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.