

The Revitalizing Spirit

Acts 2:1-21

Pentecost Sunday, (June 9) 2019

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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 on 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. Change is coming. The yellow jacket wasps find shelter under the eaves of the house and the flies disappear. Old-timers are out and putting things away, latching doors, and tying down equipment. Then it hits: a wall of wind. At one moment it was still and muggy and the next the wind hits. You can feel the cool and in a few minutes, the cold. The dirt is blowing and sometimes it turns to mud as the rain hits. Soon it's just cold, bracing rain and the dust and mud and

mugginess and lethargy are washed away. The wind hits and you have a quick intake of breath! It's invigorating! It's revitalizing!

That's a picture of Pentecost.

Like those disciples of old we're waiting. 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. Rome is still in charge so let's just get on with our busy lives. Meanwhile, the Big Church/the Temple downtown still has its walls keeping out the Gentiles, keeping the women in their place, keeping the men in theirs, and finally, behind the biggest wall, the curtain of partition, God is in that hidden away place called the Holy of Holies, separated from everyone but the High Priest. Meanwhile, where's God out here among poor people, tired people, sick people, left-out people, and ground-down-into-the-dirt-people?

We feel the pressure to give into this wall mentality and build walls to keep out the guns. It's a scary place out there and it seems to be getting worse. The people in charge seem to *want* the world to be four degrees hotter by the end of the century, and nationalist movements in our country and others seem determined to make sure the refugees we're creating have nowhere to go. Racism is one the rise and meanwhile, here at church we don't know if we can pay the bills. Things are bad and Jesus told 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, in his classic book *Goodbye to a River*, writes that he was about to give up and go home. He was wet and tired. He was canoeing down the Brazos River and it was overcast, raining off and on, and 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 writes, “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, all of a sudden 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. When Jesus died the partition in the Temple was split in two. God was no longer behind walls. And at Pentecost, there was this new sense of God 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 cloud, and more. Sometimes it is gentle and sometimes it is powerful 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.

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.

But 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. When we act with justice and peace and love, when we love God and seek to live God’s way and care for the Earth and all of God’s creatures and creation, then the Spirit brings life and all creation flourishes.

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 month, when we celebrate 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?

Now the Pentecostal coming of the Spirit was manifest in the wind but also in the tongues of fire resting upon each person. There are not as many Old Testament examples of the Spirit of God present in fire as there are of wind but there are some: God was present in the burning bush to Moses in Exodus 3 and God led the Children of Israel through the wilderness for forty years by a cloud (there it is) by day, and by night the Spirit led by a pillar of fire (Ex. 13:21).

The important thing I want you to get this morning is how the Bible and ancient and medieval church understood that God’s Spirit was the vitalizing and revitalizing presence of God throughout creation: through wind and fire, breath and light. And when we human creatures are in tune with God and God’s creation, and practice justice and peace and hospitality with all of God’s creatures, then the old view is that the Spirit is free to bless and enliven, vivify, and revitalize the Earth and crops and food and water and fresh air.

But when we 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. We choke all of creation. We block the windpipe.

You remember four years ago when 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.

The Gospel of 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, close room the disciples were in and breathed upon them. He 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.

Back to Exodus: 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. Our fossil fuel addiction and destruction of creation is saying, “We don’t care if you choke.” Creation is responding with groans and screams, storms and wind and climate change.

The new president of Brazil, a right-wing Fundamentalist Christian has just cleared the way for development and oil and gas exploration of the Amazon rain forests, the very lungs of our Earth. We’re choking our planet.

An essential question before Nacogdoches right now is will we become a community that is open and gives breathing room to one another? Can we listen to one another in each other’s language? Can we go with the flow of the Spirit of God and create and nurture a community of right relationships? Or will we become another town that shrivels up and dies because we choked to death with our walls and racism and our closing in upon ourselves?

We can harness ourselves to God's Wind in prayer and worship, singing and service. But we can also harness ourselves to the Wind of God using renewable energy sources like wind and solar, breath and fire. What if there is something to this old wisdom that might reunite us with the Spirit of God, the same Spirit that gives life and gives it abundantly (John 10:10) – the Spirit that revitalizes and changes and renews?

When I quoted John Graves earlier, he said he was about to give up. He said he had just about quit believing in changefulness. "Except that just then ... a big wind blew up ... and all of a sudden everything was the way it was supposed to be."

Don't give up! The wind of God is coming!

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