

Acts 2:1-21

John 14:8-17, 25-27; John 20:19-23

June 5, 2022

Day of Pentecost

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

BREATHE ON US, BREATH OF GOD

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

*Breathe on me, Breath of God; fill me with life anew,
that I may love what thou dost love, and do what thou wouldst do.*

Tuesday afternoon I took our dachshund, Holden, to the vet for his annual check-up. After all of the shots had been given and the physical examination was finished, Dr. Blanton talked with me about Holden's heart murmur, which has increased one level since a year ago. The doc explained what causes a heart murmur and how best to treat it at this point. One assignment we were given is to monitor Holden's respirations while he is at rest for about a week and determine an average. Dr. Blanton explained how to do that: "When Holden is resting and lying on his side, watch his rib cage going up and down. Count how many times he breathes in and out in a 15 second span and then multiply by four." He told me what the "normal" resting breathing rate should be.

Here's a little exercise: On the count of three, everybody take a deep breath and then let it out. . . Now, let's do it again. This time, pay attention to what your body does when you breathe deeply and when you exhale. Obviously, unless you are in respiratory distress, you don't typically breathe in and out in such an exaggerated manner. In fact, most of the time your breathing occurs with no conscious effort on your part, regulated by your autonomic nervous system. For many reasons, it's good that we don't have to make any conscious effort to breathe in and out, since the average breathing rate for an adult is approximately 22,000 times every 24 hours. If we had to concentrate to breathe, we would never get anything else done.

The meaning of the phrase "the breath of life" is pretty obvious. Here's how the psalmist puts it in a hymn of praise to God the Creator: "When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground." (Psalm 104:29-30) That song of praise is reminiscent of the creation story in Genesis 2: "then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being." (Genesis 2:7)

Because the breath of life is so essential, it's no surprise we have lots of sayings and phrases in our everyday language that are meaningful, even when they don't have any religious overtones:

* “breathe easy” — relax, feel relieved from anxiety, stress, or tension.

* “take a deep breath” — calm down. According to an article from the Canadian Broadcasting Company, “Breathing deeply, with a slow and steady inhalation to exhalation ratio, signals our parasympathetic nervous system to calm the body down. Long, deep breaths can also manage our stress responses to help decrease anxiety, fear, racing thoughts, a rapid heartbeat and shallow chest breathing.”¹

* “esprit de corps” — literally, “the breath of the body” — the common spirit in the members of a group and inspiring enthusiasm, devotion, and strong regard for the honor of the group.

* “team spirit” — feelings of camaraderie among the members of a group, enabling them to cooperate and work well together.

* “second wind” — a new strength or energy to continue something that is an effort.

* “a breath of fresh air” — a person or thing that constitutes a refreshing change.

Notice that those sayings use a variety of terms — breath, spirit, wind, air. The same can be said about God’s Spirit on this Day of Pentecost. The Hebrew word for “spirit” is *ru-ach*. The Greek word is *pneuma* (can’t you hear “pneumonia” and “pneumatic”?) When you read the word “spirit” in the Old and New Testaments, you can almost freely substitute words for the same meaning — the spirit of God, the wind of God, the breath of God. In ancient Greek medicine, *pneuma* was the word for the force necessary to keep the body’s vital organs functioning. As one source puts it, *pneuma* was/is the vital spirit by which the body is animated.

On the night before he died, Jesus talked with his disciples about how he was going away to the Father. You can imagine how upset the disciples must have been to hear this news about being left behind. In her study of John’s gospel, Frances Taylor Gench writes, “Fred Craddock captures the scene in a memorable image, likening the disciples to children playing on the floor, who happen to look up and see the parents putting on coats and hats. Their questions are three (and they have not changed): Where are you going? Can we go? Then who is going to stay with us?”²

Jesus’s answer to his disciples is the same answer we get when we ask, “Jesus, who will be with us today as we try to live as your faithful followers and do what you call us to do?” Jesus said (and says), “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth . . . The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.” (John 14:16-17a, 26)

When I asked the Bible study folks what came to mind when they thought of the Holy Spirit, they answered, “Comfort, peace, assurance, teaching, praying for us.” That’s certainly the picture of the Spirit that we get in the Gospel of John. On Easter evening, Jesus showed up in the midst of the disciples’ fear and said, “Peace be with you” (the same thing he said to them the night before he died, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.”) Then Jesus breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

But, did you notice, before Jesus breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit,” he commissioned his disciples with these words, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you”? (John 20:21) That sounds a lot like the instructions Jesus gave his disciples on the night he told them goodbye and promised the coming of the Advocate/Comforter/Holy Spirit: “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father . . . If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” (John 14:12, 15) In the same way, after Jesus told his disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the promised Holy Spirit, he told them, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

Remember how I said the Greek word for Spirit is *pneuma*, from which we get our word “pneumatic”? Here’s a description of how a pneumatic drill works: “A pneumatic drill, much as most air tools, requires an air motor with parts such as rotor, rotor blades, cylinder, upper and lower plates, as well as bearings. These assembled parts work together **to bring life to the tool.**”³ (emphasis added) That’s a pretty good description of how the Holy Spirit works in and among us — The body of Christ, the Church, is made up of many different parts. Those different parts require an air motor, the Holy Spirit, which helps the assembled parts to work together to bring life to the body, the Church.

Think back to those common phrases we use about spirit, wind, air, and see if they don’t describe the importance of the Holy Spirit in our Christian lives and church and what the Holy Spirit does in our Christian lives and church.

* *esprit de corps*” — literally, “the breath of the body” — God’s Spirit in the Church, the body of Christ, and inspiring enthusiasm, devotion, and strong regard for the honor of the group and for Christ.

* “team spirit” — feelings of camaraderie among the members of the body of Christ, enabling them to cooperate and work well together, “to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” (Ephesians 4:16)

* “second wind” — a new strength or energy to continue something that is an effort, such as preaching and spreading the Gospel in 1st century A.D. Asia Minor and living faithfully as followers of Jesus Christ in 21 century A.D. U.S.A.

* “a breath of fresh air” — a person or thing that constitutes a refreshing change, such as Jesus Christ, our risen Lord, who calls us to a new way of life, grounded in the Spirit, inspired by the Spirit, strengthened by the Spirit.

One preacher’s commentary on Jesus’s breath and gift of the Holy Spirit in John 20 says, “Before he left his disciples, Jesus bestowed upon them the Spirit. It seems that without the Spirit’s involvement in the lives of the disciples, there would be no peace, faith, or courage. The Spirit is needed to help the church break through the barriers of ethnicity, sex, gender, race, class, ability, etc., and must be sought. We are living through a time in which there are so many challenges in our world, a time in which the fearless prophetic voice of the church is desperately needed. This prophetic voice can only be propelled by the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.”⁴

On a regular basis, we recite the Apostles' Creed in worship as our Affirmation of Faith. Somewhat surprisingly, the creed has little directly to say about the Holy Spirit, although we can assume the Spirit is at work in and through everything else we affirm about God, Jesus, the Church, the communion of saints, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. We affirm our faith in Jesus Christ "who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary" and, in the final section, "I believe in the Holy Ghost."

Thirty-nine years ago, on Friday evening June 10, 1983 at 8:37 p.m. during a communion service, our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) denomination was constituted, healing a 122 year-old rift based in the Civil War. The plan for reunion called for the writing of a brief statement of our Reformed faith reflective of the new denomination and our calling to be faithful Christians in the rest of the 20th century and beyond. "A Brief Statement of Faith" was adopted in 1991 and became part of our church's Constitution in the *Book of Confessions*. As you would expect, the brief statement has three sections (God the Son, God the Father, God the Holy Spirit), bookended by two doxologies.

Although called "A Brief Statement," each section has more to say than the Apostles' Creed. As I read the section about the Holy Spirit, think about all you've heard today about God's Spirit — wind, breath, Spirit, creator, giver of life, esprit de corps, second wind, the Advocate, the Spirit of truth, the Spirit of power, the Spirit that calls us to discipleship.

*We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life.
The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith,
sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor,
and binds us together with all believers
in the one body of Christ, the Church.
The same Spirit
who inspired the prophets and apostles
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture,
engages us through the Word proclaimed,
claims us in the waters of baptism,
feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation,
and calls women and men to all ministries of the church.
In a broken and fearful world
the Spirit gives us courage
to pray without ceasing,
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,
to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,
to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.
In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,*

*we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
and to live holy and joyful lives,
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,
praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"*

After our Time for Reflection, we will join the choir in singing a choral response, "Spirit of the Living God, Fall Afresh on Me." As you sing, think about how the words echo these words about God's Spirit breath.

*Breathe on **us**, Breath of God; fill **us** with life anew,
that **we** may love what thou dost love, and do what thou wouldst do.*

Let us pray: God of grace, we thank and praise you for the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Come, Spirit of truth, fill our hearts. Come, Spirit of life, change our hearts. Come, Spirit of love, soften our hearts. Come, Spirit of hope, heal our hearts. Come, Spirit of faith, strengthen our hearts. Come, Spirit of God, move in our hearts. Come, Holy Spirit, guide us and give us courage that we may serve God the Father by living faithfully where we are, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹Nicole Mahabir, "From fight or flight to rest and digest: How to reset your nervous system with breath," January 12, 2018 at www.cbc.ca.

²Frances Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p. 106, citing Fred B. Craddock, *John*, Knox Preaching Guides (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 98.

³"How does a pneumatic drill work?" March 16, 2020 at www.tft-pneumatic.com.

⁴Samuel Cruz, "Commentary on John 20:19-23," June 4, 2017 at www.workingpreacher.org.