

BREATHE ON ME BREATH OF GOD MAY 23 2010
ST. LUKE'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
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There are three high holy days in the Christian Church calendar each year.

The first is Christmas when we celebrate the birth of Jesus, who is God manifest in the flesh. The second is Easter when we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, God's victory of life over death.

The third High Holy Day is today; Pentecost Sunday, 50 days after Easter, is when we celebrate the living presence of the Risen Christ around us and within us in every moment of our lives.

In these three holy days we recognize the coming of Christ, the resurrection of Christ and the living presence of Christ.

We have great celebrations at Christmas and Easter but Pentecost is just as important because this is the time when we celebrate that God is with us in this very moment and in this very place as real as the air around us and giving us love, forgiveness, blessings, healing and peace.

White stoles and altar cloths represent the coming of Christ at Christmas and the Resurrection of Christ at Easter. But red stoles and cloths represent the coming of the Spirit of Christ at Pentecost because Luke mentions that the spirit came with fire and fire is red and represents power and enthusiasm.

New Testament writers tell us two different stories about the coming of the Holy Spirit or living spirit of Christ into his followers after the resurrection. While these stories are different in details, they both tell us that the coming of the spirit of Christ or the Holy Spirit comes like the wind from God or the breath of God.

In Acts 2:1-4 Luke tells the story of the coming of the spirit when the disciples were gathered together in Jerusalem 50 days after the resurrection on what is known as Pentecost Sunday.

"...THERE CAME A SOUND LIKE THE RUSH OF A MIGHTY WIND....AND ALL OF THEM WERE FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT."

In the Gospel of John we are told that the disciples were gathered together in Jerusalem sometime after the resurrection of Jesus when the Living spirit of Christ appeared to them and breathed on them and it was through the breath of Christ that the disciples received the Holy Spirit of God.

Read John: 20:21-22: *Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. 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. 'HE BREATHED ON THEM AND SAID TO THEM: 'RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT.'*

Let us pray.

Last summer, our son Kendall and I took his son Marshall, Koretta's son Jalen, and some of the boys from his neighborhood on an overnight camping trip to a retreat center about an hour's drive from Indianapolis.

It was the first time some of these boys had ever been on an outdoor camping trip where we all slept together in one cabin and cooked our food over an outdoor campfire and went canoeing on the river.

The first night they were all so excited as we built a fire outdoors and roasted hot dogs and marshmallows, and they made s'mores for the first time in their lives. Afterwards, we sat around the campfire, answered their questions about what sounds we heard in the woods around us and watched the fire die down.

Eventually, the fire looked like it went out and the boys were disappointed that it had turned dark. However, I said, "Watch this" and I put some new twigs on top of the coals and I knelt down and blew several times on the embers and then suddenly the fire roared to life and again burned brightly.

Some of these boys were shocked and surprised that the fire came back to life and one of them thought I had done something magical and asked, "How did you do that?"

I simply explained that the fire wasn't completely out, there were still hot coals there, and hot coals need more wind or air to ignite again and when I blew on them they reignited and burst into flames again. It was amazing that some of these children had never seen that happen before and then wanted to watch the fire die down so they could blow on it and watch it burst into flame again. We had a hard time getting them to bed after all this excitement with the reigniting fire.

I think that is what happened to the disciples when the spirit came like the wind or breath of God and blew on the coals of their hearts and reignited the spark of God within them.

In the book of Acts, Luke tells us that after the resurrection of Jesus at Easter, the Living Christ appeared to the disciples on several occasions and told them to stay together in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came upon them and set their hearts on fire and empowered them to go out and share the Good News about the love of God for all people that came in Jesus Christ.

The disciples waited for 50 days in Jerusalem and then one day they were all gathered together in one place probably singing and praying when they suddenly felt the spirit of God come like a mighty wind blowing over them and reigniting the fire in their hearts that they felt when they were in the physical presence of Jesus.

It was as if the spirit of the Living Christ came like the wind and blew on the coals of their hearts and reignited fire, energy, passion and gave them the power to rush out into the streets of Jerusalem and tell the Good News of God's love for all people to the international group of people from many different nations who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish feast of Pentecost.

My image is that the fire and passion that the disciples had felt when they were in the physical presence of Jesus had died down. They had experienced the loving presence of God in the life of Jesus and it had set their hearts on fire. But then they saw him betrayed, denied, rejected, and crucified and they had become disappointed and didn't know what to do next.

The Resurrected Christ told them to wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit and they had waited for 50 days and nothing had happened. It was as if the fire and passion they had for Jesus and his message had died down and was just smoldering embers in their hearts.

Then the living spirit of Christ came like the wind and blew on those dying coals of their hearts and set their hearts on fire and they went out and preached about Jesus with power and enthusiasm and God used them to set the hearts of others on fire and now the fire has spread to us.

The other story about the coming of the Holy Spirit after the resurrection of Jesus comes from the Gospel of John and it too refers to the wind.

Here again, John tells us that the disciples were gathered together in one place wondering what to do next now that their leader was taken from them. John tells us that the door was locked out of fear of what might now happen to them. They wondered if the authorities might come and arrest and crucify them the same way they did their leader, Jesus of Nazareth.

Then, in the midst of this room of fear came an experience of faith. The Living Christ came and stood among them and said, "PEACE BE WITH YOU." In the midst of their fear the Living Christ came and spoke the word of peace, Shalom. If we want to experience the power of the Living Christ we have to let go of fear and be at peace.

Twice he says, "Peace be with you." to them and then John writes that Jesus BREATHED ON THEM AND SAID TO THEM, "RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT." Jesus breathed, he exhaled air from his lungs and it was through this breath of air that they received the Spirit of Christ into their lives. It was as if the breath of Jesus literally blew on the dying embers and their hearts were reignited and burst into flames just like when we blow on the coals of a campfire, it becomes reignited with flames.

In both Luke's and John's stories about the coming of the Holy Spirit, they point out that the spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, comes into our lives like wind or the wind of our breath.

We can't see the air around us but it is very real and it is the source of our lives as we breathe it in and out every few seconds. Without this invisible air around us to breathe we know we would all die in just a few minutes. Invisible air is essential to life.

In a similar way, we can't see the spirit of God around us, it is invisible just as the air is invisible but it is just as real and just as necessary for our lives as the air around us.

Today we celebrate the coming of the spirit of God into our lives on the air or the movement of air that we call wind or breath.

I know that sometimes the fire, energy and passion in our lives starts to die down. You know you begin a new marriage, or a new job, or a new life with great enthusiasm and energy. Then life happens. Conflicts occur, disappointments happen, illness strikes or something happens which causes that first enthusiasm to die down and the fire and passion diminish and seem to die out.

But that fire, that spark of passion and enthusiasm is still there; it just needs to be blown on by the breath of Christ, by the wind of the spirit, and it will be reignited again.

When I blew on that campfire, it reignited and when Christ breathes on us it reignites the fire, passion, joy and life in our hearts.

This is why every Sunday morning before I preach I pray a prayer that ends with these words: SET OUR HEARTS ON FIRE. My prayer is that every Sunday would be Pentecost Sunday; the time when the spirit of Christ blows on the embers of our hearts and sets our hearts on fire with the energy and passion we need to live a meaningful life.

I know that during the week the fire within us sometimes dies down. Life happens and disappointments occur. If I asked how many of us have had some disappointment during this past week, I suspect that many of us would raise our hands.

That is why we need to come to worship every week so we put ourselves in the place where the spirit of God can come and blow on the coals of our hearts and set us on fire once again.

Each week when I prepare for coming to worship here, I imagine standing here with this congregation before me. Then I take a deep breath and imagine breathing out over this congregation and I hear the words of Jesus saying as he breathed on them, "RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT."

My prayer for all of us each week is that we will experience the living presence of Christ breathing on us in worship and reigniting the spark of God within us and setting our hearts on fire.

It is interesting to me that in both John's Gospel and in the book of Acts, the spirit comes when they are together as a group of people. It doesn't come to them when they are by themselves alone someplace; the spirit comes to them when they are together with others.

Luke says they are "all together in one place" and John says that they are together in a locked upper room in Jerusalem.

Some of the most powerful spiritual experiences of my life have come to me when I was with a group of people singing together, praying together, or experiencing God together.

Whenever I go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, I prefer to go with a group of people rather than going alone. Now, I know that I could go over there and visit all of those holy sites by myself. I could rent a small boat and go on the Sea of Galilee by myself. I could visit the Garden of Gethsemane and the church of the Resurrection by myself and I could pray at the Western wall of the Temple by myself. I could do all of those things alone.

However, I know that doing all of these things with a group of people is much more spiritually and personally powerful. When you travel with a group of people for ten days you not only get well acquainted with them but each person enriches your experience by their own spirit and presence.

One of the holiest sites in Jerusalem is what is called the Church of the Holy Sepulcher which I prefer to call the Church of the Resurrection because it is the place where Jesus was crucified and resurrected.

There is a huge cathedral built over the place where, since the second century, tradition has said is the place where Jesus was crucified and resurrected.

When we went into this cathedral, we went up some steep steps into a chapel which was built over the stone outcropping known as Golgotha where Jesus was nailed to a cross between two thieves. At the front of this chapel is a big glass covering on the floor over a huge stone and you can see holes carved in

the stone. The idea is that the Roman soldiers would bring prisoners to this site, nail them to a wooden cross, set the cross in one of these holes in the stone and the prisoner would hang there until they bled to death.

Early tradition says this is the place where the Roman soldiers crucified hundreds of Jews accused of rebelling against the Roman empire in the first century and where they crucified Jesus of Nazareth on the false charges of trying to overthrow the Roman empire.

You can see the stone through this glass covering and there is a place where you can kneel under an altar and reach your hand down through a hole in the floor and touch the stone of Golgotha, this large group of stones where Jesus was crucified.

While we were standing in line to kneel under that altar and touch that stone, I noticed that everyone in our group became very quiet and reflective as we came to the place where Jesus fulfilled his statement that "greater love has no one than this; to lay down one's life for one's friends."

We could have all done that alone but to visit Golgotha with a group of friends made is a more powerful experience.

Then, about 50 yards away from the stone of Golgotha in this huge cathedral there is the tomb where early tradition says that Jesus was buried after he died and where he was resurrected. A smaller chapel which only holds about 4 or 5 people at a time was built over this tomb.

There was a long line of Christians from all over the world and all different denominations waiting to visit this small chapel and we waited in line about an hour before we were able to go in 4 or 5 at a time.

In the Gospel of Mark (14:3) we are told that Jesus once had dinner at the home of Simon, the leper, in Bethany. While they were at dinner a woman came into the house with a bottle of spikenard which was seen as a special healing ointment in the time of Jesus. This unknown woman put some of this oil on the head of Jesus to express her love and appreciation for his forgiveness and love for her.

I had purchased this small bottle of spikenard, which is made of myrrh, cinnamon and Iris petals.

I told our group that I would like to go in with the first small group of people and then stay there to offer a prayer for each group when they came in and anoint each one with oil while we were in the small chapel at the place where Jesus was resurrected from death to life.

So I went in with four others from our group and we stood in front of what had been a small cave with a slab where Jesus was wrapped in a cloth and buried after he had died on the cross and from where he was resurrected. There were paintings of the resurrection on the wall above the tomb and a place where people lit candles, placed them in sand and prayed.

When each person from our group came into this small chapel, I anointed them with this oil, made the sign of the cross on their forehead, and said their name and these words: "IN THE NAME OF THE LIVING CHRIST, YOU ARE LOVED, BLESSED AND HEALED." For me it was powerful to talk about the living Christ in the very place where he was resurrected and anoint my friends with the love, blessing and healing power of Christ.

With each group of four people we would stand in silence and pray for a moment and then each would leave silently and most of us had tears in our eyes.

It was a powerful experience of the living presence of Christ as the source of love, blessing and healing in our lives.

One person later told me that in that little chapel they took a deep breath and it felt like they were breathing in the living spirit of Christ into their lives. They said they had never had such a tangible experience of the living Christ before.

I know the experience of being in the chapel of the resurrection was much more powerful for me because we were together in a group than if I had just experienced that time in there alone.

It is certainly true that we all need to spend time alone in prayer with God on a regular basis but it is also true that we need to come together as a community of the followers of Jesus and together feel the breath of the living Lord breathing on us as a group, reigniting the embers in each of our hearts, and saying to all of us together RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT.

How do we receive the Holy Spirit? First the disciples in both John's report and in Luke's report were together singing and praying. Perhaps that is one of the ways we open up our lives to receive the spirit. When we sing, we open up our voices with words and tunes giving praise to God. When we pray, we open up our minds and hearts to God.

When we are in an open position then the spirit of God can blow into our lives, rekindle the flames in our hearts, set us on fire to bring light and hope to the world.

I suspect that we all need to have the Living Christ breathe on us and fill us with his Holy Spirit and reignite the spark of God within us.

About three weeks ago our Holy Land Pilgrimage group stayed in a hotel overlooking the Sea of Galilee. I woke up early one morning and went out to a park across from our hotel and sat on a bench overlooking this beautiful, peaceful sea. We had been on a hectic pace to catch planes and make sure that everyone got there safely. Now we had arrived and I was able to just let go. I took a few deep breaths, let the early morning sun shine on my face, felt a gentle breeze coming off the sea and I experienced the peace and the presence of God. I surrendered each person in our group and our whole experience in the Holy Land and Turkey into the hands of God. I prayed for all the Jews and Palestinians living in this country and that God would help them to live in peace together. I prayed for this congregation and that God would fill each of us full to overflowing with God's love and peace.

People often ask me how the trip to the Holy Land was this time. I say it is always a great experience. Perhaps my time of surrendering it all to God at the beginning in Galilee and feeling God's sunshine and breeze on my face was one of the ways I opened myself to allow God to come into my life.

Perhaps wherever we are in the world, we can do the same thing. We can exhale our anxieties about life, trust God with whatever happens in our lives, feel the breeze of God on our faces and inhale the living presence of Christ who breathes on us and says: RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT.

Jesus was anointed with oil when he was at a dinner in Bethany and if you would like to be anointed with oil today I would invite you to come forward after the benediction and Rev. Marsha Hutchinson, Dr. Marion Miller or I will be available to make the sign of the cross in oil on your forehead or hand and say:

IN THE NAME OF THE LIVING CHRIST YOU ARE LOVED, BLESSED AND HEALED.

My prayer is that each of us will be able to exhale all of our concerns and anxieties, feel the breeze of God's spirit and inhale the living spirit of Christ who breathes on us today and says, "RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT."

Our closing hymn has these words:

BREATHE ON ME BREATH OF GOD, FILL ME WITH LIFE ANEW.

I would like for us to imagine that the living presence of Christ is alive in this room and breathing on us and when together we surrender to God and feel the breeze of his spirit and inhale his living, loving spirit it reignites the waning embers in our hearts and sets our hearts on fire.

Let us pray.