

## 2021-05-23 Sermon TUMC Beyond Easter to Pentecost

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Acts 2:1-21

John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

Ezekiel 37:1-14

*[Invitation to deep breathing]*

On Pentecost, Christians celebrate what we often call the birth of the Church. It marks that moment which we heard about earlier from Acts 2, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on Jesus' followers, and they were empowered to take his message of love of enemies to all nations.

Birth is a good comparison to what happens with God's Spirit. I don't know if you saw this in the news, but this past week a video emerged of a couple who had to pull over on the 407 to deliver their baby in their truck by the side of the road. The little girl Nova Marie, was ready to come and there was no stopping it, it was time and it was happening! Now!

Once the baby came, the frantic parents rubbed her back until she finally took a deep breath and cried out, to their great relief. The breath of life enters her little body and everybody breathed a sigh of relief. (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/highway-407-birth-1.6032979>).

(I would like to share with you some words from an acquaintance from storytelling circles, Kathy Kulmer)

*"I wonder if the roaring wind that the people experienced at Pentecost was not like God taking a mighty cleansing breath as the church was being born...giving life and breath to something new while ridding the earth of life-destroying toxins? I wonder if there aren't times now when we could use a mighty and howling wind from heaven to fill the earth, to cleanse, de-toxify and clear the way for new birth?" (Kathy Hood Kulmer)*

In the Hebrew Scriptures, as you know, breath, wind and Spirit are all captured by one word *Ruach*. It means all those things at once.

If you think about it, breath is maybe the most powerful force there is. It is the presence that hovered over the chaos, and the life that God breathes into the first humans in our Creation narratives. Ezekiel, in a vision, prophesies breath, *Ruach*, and a mass resurrection occurs. Jesus takes charge of a wind storm and his disciples wonder, "Who is this?" The disciples at Pentecost hear a rush of mighty wind and nothing is ever the same again.

(A quote from Kathy again)

*"Lord, You know how when the bones lay dry in the valley because the life had gone out of them...because they had gotten so far removed from their life source and life force...that the*

*breath couldn't get at them and into them...and without breath, there can be no life? Sometimes we need the force of Your breath to suck us in again...to bring us back to life...to put new life in us where the life has gone out...to bring back hope where hope has retreated. Sometimes we need fresh winds to blow...so that what has died or grown lifeless in us can be stirred up...and brought back to life again.” (Kathy Hood Kulmer)*

A trust in the abiding presence of God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit, who is beyond human scope and comprehension, is where I place my greatest hope for the church and for the world.

And so I invite you to remember with me today a few things that we know about the Holy Spirit, maybe it will inspire us.

Our conversation partners are three parts of Scripture which tell us about the character of the Holy Spirit.

In Ezekiel we have the most amazing and macabre (creepy) vision of God's power for restoration. An ancient battlefield brought back to life by God's Spirit as an enlivening breath.

In John we have Jesus saying a loving and long goodbye to the disciples at the last supper and promising the Paraclete (that's our new word for today). It means abiding helper, advocate, counsellor, whom we trust to be the life breath of the church to this day. The Holy Spirit.

And in Acts we have the disciples gathered in Jerusalem for the Jewish festival of Pentecost and that same empowering that Jesus had promised taking place in the most fantastic and unexpected way!<sup>1</sup>

One thing that I noticed about the workings of the Spirit in these passages is that Spirit gathers. Gathers up bones, gathers Jesus and the disciples for some comforting words on the eve of his death, and gathers people from around the ancient world for that pouring out of languages.

Many of us are wondering “When can we gather again?” The folks in leadership at TUMC have that question ever before us. I'm happy to say to you that God's Spirit isn't waiting around for us not to be physically distant anymore. I have so appreciated how this church community has chosen to keep gathering, even if it's on zoom. And I know it is not everyone's cup of tea, and it's getting old. And yet, week after week, when we gather even virtually, Spirit is inspiring and working through our prayer times, our worship, our bible studies and our committee meetings, and building us up as a caring and inclusive community that reflects God's love. Thanks be to God!

Spirit gathers.

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<sup>1</sup> Pentecost was first of all a Jewish feast, *Shavuot* commemorating the giving of the *Torah* (the first five books in the Hebrew Bible) to Moses at Mount Sinai. We Christians have appropriated the term because the event we heard about in Acts happened during that festival. Both experiences are about God forming a people.

Spirit also seems to be unpredictable — as befits a divine power beyond us! The folks in Acts were overtaken by this rushing wind, tongues of fire (what even is that?!) and xenolalia (A second new word for today, but I give you two. xenolalia is the ability to speak in a language which the individual has not learned). I'm pretty sure Ezekiel did not expect the turn of events that would make a nightmare become a vision of hope.

When Jesus was gathered for his last supper with his disciples, he also told them a few things about the Spirit. He said that Spirit would come after him and bear witness to his life and teachings. Jesus, who called himself Truth, said that God was sending into the world a Spirit of Truth. So Spirit is present when there is truth and restoration.

Back when we were thinking together about “what is being revealed?” through the pandemic, we touched on many difficult things that are being uncovered in our time: racism, bigotry, the power of patriarchal systems, the plundering of the Earth and other deep and ongoing injustices. Hard as they are to face, the breaking down and the writhing of these evil systems is the Spirit at work bringing Truth into the world. So, let us align ourselves with this wind of the Spirit who seeks justice and healing, who calls for Truth, no matter how difficult it is.

(Again some words from my friend Kathy)

*“Lord, Sometimes we need the power of Your breath...a fresh breath...a cleansing breath to rein-in, as well as reign over the chaos in the world...and in us. We need the power of Your breath to stir up things...things hidden under or buried beneath that cannot make their way to open air unless Your breath goes/blows there. Sometimes we need fresh winds to blow...making way for something new to grow...to move us and in us...and out of us...whirling wind...to get caught up in.” (Kathy Hood Kulmer)*

In the spirit of truth, I must now make a small digression.

The thing is, there are many possible ways we could approach these scripture passages and I am reading through a very limited lens, to find the *character* of the Holy Spirit.

But there is another track which needs to be mentioned because it makes our engagement with these passages a bit more complicated. Unfortunately all these texts also have some of the seeds of the great and deadly divisions and conflict between the Christian church and the Jewish faith from whence it came.

In Jesus' farewell speech, the bit about persecution, which the narrator of John includes, ties into a tragic thread of anti-judaism that John carries throughout this gospel. A thread which sewed up anti-semitism within Christendom for many centuries and has caused so much terrible damage ever since. We must guard against this.

And then the vision that came to Ezekiel was a vision of the restoration of an exiled people of Israel to what they saw as their land. This understanding still fuels some of the most horrible conflicts we see in Israel Palestine to this very day and causes great injustice to Arabs in the

birthplace of Christianity. Today I am reading this as a metaphor and with great caution. But I hold it in tension with other more difficult readings.

I have chosen not to engage with this in one sermon on a Sunday where we celebrate a blessing of the Holy Spirit. But I do not want to ignore the issues these passages raise. Reading the Bible is tangled in so many ways. I am more than happy to take up more conversations around this if you wish. And here the digression in the spirit of Truth ends.

Back to Pentecost and the character of the Holy Spirit, Holy Breath.

There are two final and crucial aspects that Jesus tells his disciples about the Spirit. Spirit is an ever present help, just as Jesus was. An Advocate and counsellor for them, and by extension for us. That word advocate stands out to me. My spiritual director (God bless her!) often talks about those voices of judgement that live inside of me (sometimes outside of me) as the voices of the Accuser. Spirit stands in sharp contrast as the Advocate, the defender, bringing comfort, guidance and rising in defence of Christ's way of love and truth in how I speak to myself and to others. I long to pay more attention to the Advocate than the Accuser and I invite you to do the same.

And finally, Jesus tells us that Spirit helps us remember all things that Jesus taught us and that God would have us live into. I am grateful for the Holy Spirit when we try to discern who is going to be on the Preaching Team, who is going to be on the Caring Team, what direction are we moving in. We are promised that we will have counsel in these things. I hold this in deep trust that we can, in fact, be guided and transformed by the Spirit in our church decisions, in our inner spiritual lives and in furthering reconciliation into a broken world. As we celebrate communion together, let us remember the source of our hope.

I end with a prayer by Wendy Janzen

Wild Wind of the Spirit,  
on this Pentecost day  
we revel in the ways  
your presences lives  
and moves among us  
and through us -  
inspiring us,  
challenging us,  
unsettling us.  
May we be open  
to the winds of change,  
welcoming and  
bending to new ways  
of being.  
May we embrace  
and celebrate the

lively and generative  
energy of this day,  
empowering us to be  
agents of transformation  
in our spheres of influence,  
voices for the voiceless,  
and visionaries  
for a new future.  
Amen.