

“Breathing Lessons”

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5-20-18 Pentecost Sunday

Based upon Acts: 1-21; John 20:19-23

Have you heard the one about when the three persons of the Godhead decided they would take a vacation? “I think I’ll go to visit the Canadian Rockies this year,” said God the Creator. “I haven’t been there in a while, and I’d like to revisit that particular wonder of my creation.” “I’m going back to the land of my birth this year,” Jesus said. “There’s been a lot of trouble there recently, and I’d like to go and see for myself how things are going.” “Well,” announced the Holy Spirit, “I’ve decided that this year I want to spend my vacation in a place where I’ve never been before. That’s why I am planning to spend my entire summer vacation visiting Presbyterian churches!”

Ha, ha, ha.... hrumph! Actually, that joke is kind of harsh and unfair when you think about it. I’m mean just because Presbyterians like to do things decently and in order, just because we are stereotyped as “the frozen chosen,” doesn’t mean that we do not know the Spirit. We strive to follow the Spirit’s leading all the time. In fact, one of the reasons there has always been so much infighting in our denomination throughout the ages is that there is always a group within the Church which believes the Spirit is leading us into a new direction. We try very hard to discern the Spirit from our own inclinations and desires in the Church, and to follow wherever the Spirit leads.

But that being said, it is true that no one is at risk of mistaking Presbyterians for Pentecostal Christians. It’s not that we don’t love the Spirit as much as they do, it’s just that we aren’t comfortable with the idea of expressing that love by speaking in tongues in worship, or wailing and crying and collapsing on the ground. We also know enough about the Spirit from today’s story of Pentecost to understand that even if we don’t start babbling in foreign languages, if we open ourselves to tongues of fire dancing on our heads, then anything could happen. As Leonora Tubbs Tisdale put it, on Pentecost, “this wild Spirit wind of God... toppled all human understandings of who is in and who is out, who is clean and who is unclean, who is worthy to proclaim the Gospel and who is not.... It is the unruliness of the Spirit, the unpredictability that makes Presbyterian types so nervous about the Holy Spirit. We can’t control it, any more than we can control a hurricane.”¹

So even though we pray a prayer of illumination for the Spirit to come before all of our scripture lessons, in the depths of our hearts not all of us truly mean what we pray. Often what we really want is for the Spirit to come and confirm what we already believe about the text, or God, or our lives. Often what we really want is for the Spirit to come and give us just a gentle sign that God is with us. We don’t need our socks blown off or the foundations of our theological understanding knocked down. We just would like confirmation that God is present with us, and is showing us the way.

¹ Tubbs Tisdale, Leonora, “*The Wind That Blows the Doors Off*,” in JOURNAL FOR PREACHERS, Vol XXVI, No. 4, Pentecost 2003, 56.

Since the Bible says that God conveyed that bit of good news to the disciples and a few hundred others gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost in an unmistakably dramatic way, however, that leaves us in kind of an awkward and uncomfortable place when we celebrate the holiday ourselves. We don't really want to be shaken up or forced to change, but we still yearn to be inspired. We are a little bit scared of the Spirit, but also a little bit disappointed when week after week we go through life without so much as a lick of fire near our heads. I know this about us, which is why this year instead of spending a lot of time dissecting the inspiring and intimidating story from *Acts* which we all know very well, I wanted us to think about the other gift of the Spirit story in the Bible, the one most of us have forgotten if we ever knew it, the one in *The Gospel of John*.

John wrote his gospel after Luke wrote *The Book of Acts*. So, John may or may not have known Luke's account of all that happened to the crowds in Jerusalem on Pentecost. John never rejects the truthfulness of Luke's account. But John nevertheless makes clear in his gospel, that Pentecost day in Jerusalem was not the first time the Spirit was given to the original eleven disciples. The first time, according to John, was on the day of Jesus' Resurrection. Mary Magdalene had followed the risen Christ's instructions to go tell the disciples of his rising. She had found them shut up in hiding in a room in Jerusalem, afraid of what the authorities might do to them. Suddenly, the risen Christ appeared to them inside the room, no more slowed down by the walls and locked door than he had been by the stone in front of his tomb. He wasn't transparent like a ghost however; his disciples could touch him and recognize Jesus as the man that they knew. "Peace be with you!" he said. Then, after giving them some time to process their shock and delight in his arrival, Jesus got down to business. He commissioned them to go and share the good news and equipped them for that task by breathing on them.

Making the most of her poetic imagination, Barbara Brown Taylor describes the moment this way: "He commissioned them by breathing on them, opening his mouth and pouring what was inside of him into them so that their bangs blew and their eyelashes fluttered and they could smell where he had come from—not just Golgotha and Galilee, but way before that—back when the world itself was born. Anyone standing there that evening with any memory at all could smell Eden on his breath; salt brine, river mud, calla lilies. They could feel their own lungs fill as they breathed in what he breathed out. What their fear had killed in them, his breath brought back to life. It was Genesis Redux, as they were created all over again by the power of the Spirit that was coming out of his mouth."²

I don't know whether Jesus' breath really smelled like calla lilies and holy mud, but I do know that in the Bible the same word is used for both breath and Spirit—*ruach* in the Hebrew and *pneuma* in the Greek. So after the Spirit of God, the *ruach*, moves over the water in *Genesis* creating heaven and earth; God then breathes life into Adam and Eve with it. The *ruach* breathes life into all of God's animals in *Psalms* 104's tribute to Creation in the same way, and when God and Ezekiel are having a chat over the desiccated old bones of the once glorious army of Israel, God breathed on the bones and once again they come to life. (*Ezek.* 37). The Spirit is life-giving.

² Taylor, Barbara Brown, "God's Breath", in JOURNAL FOR PREACHERS, vol. XXVI, No. 4, Pentecost 2003, 38.

She is the third person of the Godhead, but she is also the breath of God.

The disciples needed new life, needed to be revived by the Spirit if they were to be able to fulfill the commission Jesus gave them. Like the dementors in the *Harry Potter* series, which suck the souls out of their victims and leave them in despair, the crucifixion has sucked most of the faith, hope, and love out of the disciples. They were filled with doubt, despair, and fear. So, Jesus came to them like an anti-dementor and breathed new life into them. It was like CPR for their souls. Without any pyrotechnics or multilingual pronouncements, the Spirit transformed the disciples so they were able to leave their self-imposed tomb just like Jesus had, go where he wanted them to go, and do what he wanted them to do because Christ gave the Spirit to his followers for that very purpose.

I am so glad this story was included in Scripture because it shows us that there is more than one way to receive the Spirit. Sometimes people do feel the Spirit like a Santa Ana wind stirring up trouble and new possibilities, but other times people feel the Spirit more like a kiss, a breath of fresh air, an inexplicable resurgence of energy, faith, and hope. So if you are a little uneasy about having tongues of fire dance on your head, or if you feel cheated or rejected because you have never had a dramatic experience of the Spirit, do not worry. The Spirit has already been a part of your life and always will be. If you want to open yourself to experiencing her, just breathe in as you pray, like the high priest did once a year in the Holy of Holies. Remember I said a month or so ago that he would go in and breathe because to say the name of God, “Yah-weh,” is to breathe in and out? One way or the other the Spirit will fill us and give us new life and equip us to do as God would have us do.

Tony Campolo tells the story of a miraculous experience from his childhood when the breath of the Spirit transformed his situation in more way than one. His family was poor when he grew up, so when he was a high school student, he was always taking odd jobs and looking for ways to make money. One way was to buy the leftover bread from the local bakery at nine o'clock when it closed, and then sell that bread for a profit to the local diners. Every night he would bike to the bakery, and then bike all over selling the bread. One rainy, dark night when he was heading home at eleven o'clock feeling miserable and tired, one of the tires on his bike blew. He had been working so hard to support the family that this unexpected event on top of the dark, cold, wetness of the night, pushed him to tears and despair. He moaned to God, “God, everybody thinks you are good and maybe you are to other people, but it seems like you're mean to me. How could you let this happen? Why can't you help me? I think after today I'm just not going to believe in you anymore!”

After a while he got up to begin the long, freezing, wet walk home. He hadn't gone far when he passed a gas station. Looking back, he didn't know why he stopped because he should have known the effort would be futile. But he did stop and went over to the air pump. He didn't put any money in but inexplicably the air flowed out anyway and inflated his popped tire. He didn't hesitate. He climbed on his bike and pedaled all the way home praying, “Thank you Jesus! Thank you, thank you!” When he got home at 11:30 p.m., he carried the bike onto his porch, put a key in the lock, and suddenly heard a swooshing sound. Within seconds, the blown-out tire was completely flat again. In the morning, when he went out to look at the tire, he discovered a three-

inch long rip in the side. The inner tube was torn apart. It never should have held any air at all. That's when he knew that something miraculous had happened. That day God not only blew the air into his tire that he needed to get him home, God blew the air of new life into Tony's heart and re-inflated his faith as well. Instead of giving up on Christianity, he went on to become one of its greatest evangelists.³

We all have flat-tire days, if not literally, then figuratively. We have days when life feels too hard and believing even harder. Campolo's story, and both of today's Scripture lessons, serve as powerful reminders therefore that God's Spirit is with us, and in both gentle and powerful ways can make all the difference in our lives. The Spirit who speaks to us through flat tires, sunsets, dreams, and the sound of silence, and who comforts us when we want to quit, is not some kind of lesser spirit reserved for folks who aren't faithful enough to speak in tongues or holy enough to survive a dancing flame on their head. For the disciples on lock-down in Jerusalem, the Spirit felt like little more than the exhalation of a dear friend. So, we do not need to fear the Spirit, or fear that she isn't with us. She is always filling us up with what we need to keep going.

But whether the Spirit comes to us quietly or dramatically, we must not expect to be the same afterwards. Even Jesus himself was changed by the Spirit. No sooner did the Spirit descend upon him like a beautiful, gentle dove during his baptism, than it sent him out into the wilderness to be tested. The Spirit is the breath of God, capable of creating and recreating the whole world, bringing dry bones back to life, and transforming a bunch of scared uneducated fishermen into evangelists who changed the whole world. Whether she comes as a whisper or a whirlwind, the Spirit always brings us or leads us to newness—new ways of understanding Scripture, ourselves or each other, new ways of living, new assignments that God wants us to fulfill. Therefore, while we do not need to fear the Spirit, we must not pray in our hearts for the Spirit to tap us on the shoulder and leave us just the same. We must not pray for the Spirit to do our will, or confirm our way. We can pray for courage, for faith, for hope; we can even pray for signs of God's presence. But we must do so with minds and hearts open to the new life the Spirit inevitably gives, trusting that Christ gave us the Spirit not to suck out our souls, but to save them and send us where God wants us to go.

When human beings are anxious, either from fear or anticipation, we tend to breathe shallowly, taking little gasps of air from the top of our lungs instead of deep from our bellies. That is why the first step of almost all relaxation techniques is to take the time to breathe deeply. But when you are afraid, upset, or excited, this can be hard to do. So, a wise woman, an acupuncturist, I had years ago, once told me that when you feel as though you can't breathe deeply, the secret to getting more air is to stop focusing on trying to breathe deeply, and instead focus on breathing out. She told me to concentrate on blowing out of your lungs every last little bit of air you can and hold your breath out for as long as you can. After that, your lungs will open, and you will breathe in all the way to your belly automatically. I think this technique works in matters of faith too. If you are afraid of what the Spirit might ask of you, feel like you can't breathe because you are overwhelmed or feeling defeated, or if you desperately want to

³ Campolo, Tony, Let Me Tell You a Story: Life Lessons from Unexpected Places and Unlikely People (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 2000), 32-34.

experience the Spirit but feel that you haven't, don't try to breathe in deeply; you'll only hyperventilate. Instead, begin your prayer time by blowing out all the air in your lungs. As you blow out the air, speak your prayer in your mind and heart: "O God, some say you are good but to me you seem mean or absent... O God, I need you but I am not sure that you are here... O God I am afraid of this new way of doing church, or this new way I'm going to have to live, or this impossible task that lies ahead of me..." Blow all of your air out as if you are trying to blow away your fears and your heartache. Then when your lungs are about to burst for need of air, stop blowing and breathe in deeply. "Yah- weh." You may not smell mud and calla lilies, but you can trust that the Spirit is with you, filling you with God's breath, renewing you and sending you on God's way. Amen.