

Pentecost 2021 (B)

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

May 23, 2021

Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15; Acts 2:1-21

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

I don't know about you, but I used to think that Pentecost and the Holy Spirit were not for me. I grew up in the Bible Belt, and let me tell you a few things about the people that we called the Holy Rollers. For one thing, the Holy Rollers don't talk about the Holy Spirit. They talk about the "Holy Ghost." For another thing, they have very rowdy worship services. Not unlike the event that we read about in the second chapter of Acts. A lot of clapping, a lot of drums and tambourines, a lot of whooping and shouting. And a lot speaking in tongues. Growing up in the Bible Belt, I was taken along to some holy roller worship services, usually because of a friend or a babysitter or something. I found it unsettling and even scary. For example, grownups cried, something I almost never saw anywhere else. At a young age, I wasn't finding God in that kind of church. God was finding me in this kind of church.

Now that I am a much older age, I have come to the conclusion that organized religion has generally put the Holy Spirit on the back burner. Despite the fact that the theology of organized Christianity says you can't do that. And so instead, meanwhile, the churches that we might call the less organized churches have really focused on the Holy Spirit and the manifestations of the Holy Spirit. Despite the fact that the Bible— Old Testament and New Testament— has some cautionary words about the flashy spiritual gifts. To me, it can seem like there are two forms of Christianities. The uptight churches that are uncomfortable with the Holy Spirit, and shun the Holy Spirit to a certain extent. And the loosey goosey churches that use the Holy Spirit to justify an emotional kind of Christianity that is uncomfortable with organization and shuns the maturity and wisdom of the wide communion of saints. I don't know if I'm right. But if I am, then I'd also say that both forms of Christianity are limiting their minds with a human perspective, and not being fully open to God's perspective.

The Day of Pentecost is reckoned as the third most important Christian holy day after Easter and Christmas. And at first glance, the central text that is always used on this day, the second chapter of Acts, reinforces the perceptions that I developed when I was young. There's the disorder, the chaos, the speaking in tongues. There's the charismatic preacher, the big crowd. But the second chapter of Acts, as great as it is, is not even the tip of the iceberg of what the Bible has to say about the Holy Spirit. So to help us understand the Holy Spirit in a more scriptural way, to help us be less limited by human perspective and more open to God's perspective, I'm going to give us a basic vocabulary lesson.

And this may be familiar to you already. If so, that's great. The Bible word that we translate as Spirit is literally breath, is literally wind. Air in motion. This is true in both Bible languages. The Hebrew of the Old Testament. The Greek of the New Testament. Spirit is wind is breath. It's one word. Our first reading today is a spectacular example of that. It's the prophet Ezekiel. And in the service folder, the note that our helpful publishing house Augsburg Fortress has helpfully shared with us says, "*The Hebrew word rendered as ruach means "spirit," "wind," or "breath." This reading plays on the different meanings of the word.*" I don't know if you had time to see that. *This reading plays on the different meanings of the word.*" And you could take the service folder home, and go to the first reading and circle every time that spirit occurs. Which is twice. And every time that wind occurs. Which is once. And every time that breath occurs. Which is seven. And that's all the same word. *Ruach* in Hebrew. The breath of God, the wind of God, the Spirit of God. It's one concept. Ezekiel is famous because the prophet keeps getting transported from one part of the Mideast to another. And this passage says it's the wind, which kind of implies that the Spirit is blowing Ezekiel from one spot to another.

Now it's one word, *ruach* in Hebrew. In the New Testament Greek language, it's also one word. *Pneuma*. From which we get the word pneumatic. Like an air powered stapler. Pneumatic tools. Maybe you remember pneumatic tubes at the drive up window of the bank. *Pneuma* is spirit, wind, breath, breeze in the New Testament. In English, we don't have masculine and feminine nouns but in Hebrew and Greek you do. And Hebrew *ruach* and Greek *pneuma* are both feminine nouns. So when you do your vocabulary studies, you see that linguistically, Spirit is feminine.

So maybe you knew that already. But a lot of people don't know that. It's not to say that the Spirit is *LIKE* wind or breath. The Bible says today that there is something *LIKE* tongues of fire. The gospels say the Spirit descended on Jesus *LIKE* a dove. Our congregation is named for this metaphor, this simile. *LIKE* a dove. But the way the Bible is written, the Spirit is not *LIKE* a breath. The spirit is not *LIKE* wind. The Spirit *IS* wind, the Spirit *IS* breath.

So perhaps of all the things that the Holy Spirit means, it is the life force of God. It's the intimate life force of God. What happens in Genesis? Adam is made of what? Clay or mud. And God breathes life into him. But remember, breath is spirit. Life is breathing. At the end of life, someone takes their last breath. At the beginning of life, that little baby's lungs inflate for the first time, and such a loud sound comes from such a little creature. And *WE* know, we understand, the biology of lungs and oxygen. We might think about breathing as a mechanical process. But ancient peoples did not know the mechanics of the diaphragm. They didn't think of us doing the breathing. They thought of the breath of life, the breath of God, *the Spirit*, keeping us alive, entering into us. When somebody sneezes, we still say "God bless you," because in pre-scientific times, they thought that God's spirit might get blown out of you in a sneeze, and an evil spirit could come in. Some of you have occasionally had to enroll in respiratory therapy. Do you see how the word "spirit" is embedded in respiration? Inspire, conspire, perspire, respire— the word spirit is embedded in all of them. The Spirit, the breath, the life force, is very close to us, very physically involved in our bodies. And for the people who wrote the Bible, this was God's life, this was God's action, this was God at work, this was God keeping us alive. This was God's

Spirit.

And so this is the background of the Holy Spirit. It goes back to Adam. It goes back to before Adam. Page one. *“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.”* The wind of God blowing across the dark waters before there was life as we know it, before there was light as we know it. You can substitute “spirit” for wind. Just as the King James does: *In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.*

What is happening in the rowdy Pentecost story of Acts chapter two is the Easter manifestation of this ancient Spirit of God. The life of God activating among the followers of Jesus. Our psalm today said, *Send forth your Spirit and renew the face of the earth.* We sang that a few times. Today, the last Sunday of Easter, the resurrected and living Jesus is involved in this sending of the Spirit, and renewing the followers of Jesus.

What this means for you and for me is the life of God, the power of God, intimately involved in our lives. In our gospel reading, Jesus gives the Spirit a new name, the Paraclete, or the Advocate: the constant companion and guide that is God’s life, God’s agency, with us constantly and intimately, as near as our next breath. According to the gospel reading, this gift and closeness to God was won for us by Jesus’ lifting up, by his death, resurrection, and ascension. It is the culmination of Easter. But the beginning of something new for the followers of Jesus. *Send forth your Spirit and renew the face of the earth.* Renewal of life. The ultimate meaning of Easter. *Send forth your Spirit and renew the face of the earth.* Amen.