

The Breath of God

Menno Mennonite Church
June 5, 2022

This is Pentecost Sunday

Purpose: To celebrate the gift of the spirit that has been given from generation to generation.

Message: As people of God we are invited to welcome the work of the spirit as it works in its wide variety of manifestations both in the past and the present.

Scripture *Numbers 11:24-30 (I will read), Acts, 2:1-21* [Please read]

Synopsis: If we are honest with ourselves, we don't know what to do with the Holy Spirit. The more effusive experiences much valued in some corners of the church are simply not our style. Prophecy, tongue speaking, and what not is just not our style. We would just as soon keep the movement of God's spirit well contained, organized and accounted for within our lives. Yet the spirit comes all the same, breaking out of our confines, our expectations, moving us to faithfulness, new life, and new hope both in the past and in the present.

Numbers 11:24-31

²⁴ So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD ; and he gathered seventy elders of the people, and placed them all around the tent.

²⁵ Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied.

But they did not do so again.

²⁶ Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp.

²⁷ And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp."

²⁸ And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, "My lord Moses, stop them!"

²⁹ But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!"

³⁰ And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

Among the many things we are given in our schooling to prepare us for a bright future, I am guessing that there are a few things that we might leave by the way side. The Pythagorean theorem with the squares of the sides of a triangle equaling the square of the hypotenus comes in handy now and again in carpentry and quilting, if you want to be very precise. It is often helpful to remember the I before E rhyme to help out with spelling. But I am guessing that, for the most part, the volume of our scholastic memory labeled “Poetic devices” remains placed well on the shelf gathering dust. Not because it is unimportant or uninteresting—I would never say that. I did at one point study language arts with a thought toward teaching, after all. But even the most ardent member of the Modern Language Association must admit that the aesthetic mechanisms don’t come up too often in the day-to-day. It might be helpful to remember that there is a reason why the word splat is just so very satisfying to say, and that reason is onomatopoeia—the word sounds like what it describes—but otherwise not very practical. And were I to write the rest of this sermon in Iambic Pentameter, it might be time for me to take some time off for a rest. I didn’t—you don’t need to count syllables.

But there are some places where these skills geared at describing well and artfully the indescribable does have a role in our lives and in our world. It is right here: in our Spiritual lives. Especially on days like today—Pentecost—and we take on the 3rd person of the trinity, and try to wrap our heads around the Holy Spirit. As if describing well the creator of the universe—YHWH maker of heaven and of Earth, or speaking about the demands and implications of the image of God in Christ is tricky enough. When we come to something as wild and subjective as the Holy Spirit take a whole other level of language and imagination. It takes the work that has a whole lot more to do with the poetic—the similes and metaphors that stretch to acquire language to describe the indescribable than it does the workings of the academic proofs that would nail something down with unassailable logic.

It can be especially challenging for us of the mainline traditions. This is not, really, our day. We are not always quite sure what to do with the Spirit, let alone how to celebrate it well. we have strong metaphors; wind, fire, breath of God, dove, the still small voice—the images that we bring to begin the conversation of trying to describe the presence of the holy in our lives. We hesitate to embrace the concrete experiences of the spirit where expression and exaltation are the primary indicators of the presence of God in our midst. We struggle to find the metaphors to wrap our heads around a manifestation of God so closely personal yet so immensely powerful,

hesitate to name the movement of the spirit in our lives and our midst sometimes for lack of knowing how to speak to it, let alone how to recognize it. The spirit is something that defies our similes, shatters our metaphors, and, often, connects to an experience of God that is often one that we don't entirely know what to do with. One wonders what would happen if the Holy Spirit would strongly take us at our word and come with a power that we do not often expect, that we don't always know how to handle, that we don't entirely know how to seek, let alone express. We end up a whole lot like the well-meaning elders of our text, hurrying to keep a cap on things let the Spirit get out of control then those ready to hear the moving of the winds and stand amazed.

I chose this Old Testament Pentecost this morning for a couple of reasons. First is to break the mythology that we so easily build that the Spirit of God is a manifestation of God limited to the Christian Church alone. Yes, Christianity has spent the most theological time and effort to explain and embody the Spirit, but where the creator is, so too will the working of the Spirit, no matter what the epoch or the name attached. Secondly, it just sounds like us doesn't it? We are entering with Luke and Anna the dawning realization of the power of the dodge. The light has gone on that can blame someone else for what has happened—anyone else, including the uncomprehending dogs—then there are points to be scored. However, when you turn up with your face marked over with green marker, right down to your earlobes and it is your sister you choose to throw under the bus, it is not going to work. There might have been a marker in her hands, but you held very still to make sure it all went alright, so you were onboard with this one. There is something fundamentally human about this. From the very beginning we were quick to lay blame (She gave me the apple) and careful to find fault (he cheated me out of my inheritance). Especially where God is involved, so too is our inclination to jealousy and condensation. Jealousy at times where we might wish for a more fluid understanding of the Spirit. Condensation when we know OUR way of knowing and encountering the Spirit and look down at those who do not understand or appreciate the working of the Spirit the same way we are. Yet God, like Moses in this story seems profoundly disinterested in credentialing and certifying the WAY we know the Spirit, hoping instead that we find a way, anyway, for the people of God to receive and be filled, hopefully without fighting about it for the trouble.

Because Spirit is hard. It is near at hand, yet also out of control, doing its work despite our inability to articulate it or anticipate its results. Almost like the Lone Ranger, we are left to

ask what was that unifying spirit, that consoling presence, that empowering conviction of the soul masked by our inarticulate language of the Spirit. We struggle with celebrations of the spirit as we struggle to articulate this most inarticulatable experience of God with us. Sometimes we wonder whether absent the large manifestations that are so readily labeled spirit filled and spirit life whether perhaps we might be missing the boat, or just don't get it entirely. Sometimes, we would just as soon do without this most mysterious manifestation of God's presence with God's people, and to stick with the more reliable expressions that we know and love, that we are comfortable with, and that we know best how to express and control.

I think we do well to expand our vocabulary of the Spirit because the Spirit is so much more active and present than just the things that get branded as such. Here, even the original language of the moving of the Spirit of God helps us. Within the original Greek and Hebrew the working and presence of the Spirit is not tied up in a tortured and contrived metaphor of the unknowable or the unattainable. Instead the whole language is founded on the utterly human and organic reality of life itself. The Hebrew renders the Spirit of God as the Ruhua Eloheim—the breath of God. The Greek speaks repeatedly through the Pentecostal accounts to the Pnema h' Theu; again the breath of God. So the working of the Spirit and the infilling of God into life is spoken of as the very thing that enables life in the first place and is present from the formation of creation to the breathing of the Spirit out onto the disciples in the revelation of the Spirit.

I love this because it is so immediate and knowable, yet something, like breath, that we may not even consider in the day to day. Much like the Spirit. The breath of God works for each of us because it is so much part of the ordinary, the near and the essential. Of course the Spirit can move with wind, fire and dove, but for most of us that has not been our immediate experience. It is the breath of God that works within us each day, sustaining us, being real with us, moving within our spirit, within our souls, to be about the creating and creative work of God and the coming of God's Kingdom. When we want to center into ourselves, we often call attention to our breathing to the slow intake of oxygen and the exhalation that follows. It takes effort to do this, to cue into the nearness of this activity, to become aware of what our body is doing.

Likewise, we miss the Spirit when we are not building our consciousness of it. Yet we know how to breath, and we can, when we take the time, to know the miracle of each breath we

are given, and to know it as the gift it is. Perhaps this is our best metaphor: the Spirit as the enlivening sustaining one that carries us through the world and our living come what may.

We need days like today to remind us to breath, and in breathing, know that the work of bringing the Kingdom move within us and despite us, not matter what. And for that and in that, we can rejoice. May this be our Pentecost as we breath God's enlivening Spirit, always.