

**Sunday, May 28, 2023**  
**Psalm 104:24-34, 35b, Acts 2:1-21**  
**"Just be open"**

**The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching**

"Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh upon me" is what we call a Breath Prayer. Take a moment and breath in – spirit of the living God – and breath out – fall afresh upon me. Every Pentecost we need to be reminded that each and every day we should pray, for the spirit of our living God, to once again enter into our hearts, in the very breath, we breath in and out, so that we can feel God's presence all day long, like on that day of Pentecost.

A couple years ago I thought I had the perfect Pentecost Children's Sermon right here. Do any of you remember? Well, it was almost 10 years ago. So, I had a fan and bright red streamers attached to it. I was going to turn the fan on full blast so that it made a huge rattling noise and let the wind blow in their faces, blowing their hair and making them wince with their eyes, as I spoke about when Jesus' followers were gathered, they couldn't see the Holy Spirit but felt it like that wind and heard it like that fan. So I call the children forward and I turn on the fan and the power was so weak, even in their face, they could barely feel the wind. The streamers didn't really blow. They were confused, they didn't understand what I was talking about. It was a total bust. But then again, explaining the Holy Spirit, this story, the tongues of fire, the languages, prophecy, vision, dreams, fire, blood, smoky mist? This Holy Spirit stuff is confusing to us adults too. I'll explain it today as best I can, but in the end, understanding the power of the Holy Spirit, takes faith, it takes being open, just being open to that power, that gift of the holy spirit.

The Holy Spirit is a gift but it is kind of a strange gift, isn't it? Have you ever been given a gift, on Christmas or your birthday and you have no idea what it is? Is this a scarf or a cloth napkin? Are these earrings or fishing lures? Is this a ninja or a coffee grinder? Well, the gift of the Holy Spirit can seem like this, what is it? What exactly is it for? Maybe the gift of the Holy Spirit is God's way of shaking the moss off the church, blowing the cobwebs out of the sanctuary, and allowing electricity and excitement to energize the church. God knows we need that right? Maybe the Holy Spirit is God's gift of power to the church, shaking us up and getting us to commit to changing things. God knows we need that too. But probably the gift of the Holy Spirit is the gift of something to say, a word to speak in the brokenness and tragedy of the world that is unlike any other word. The words you have been given today. Words that can bring hope in this sometimes violent, many times unjust, always confused, world we live in. We need those gifts of the spirit in our lives.

The Spirit of God moves in and out and flows where it will and no one knows where it goes, no one knows where it will lead you, guide you, or direct you in your own life, so, be open, just be open to it. Being open to the spirit, filled with the spirit, led by the spirit, living in the power of the spirit, can help you, comfort you, sustain you, change you, inspire you, as much as it did those first apostles of Jesus, on the Day of Pentecost.

Actually, the Jewish Festival of Shavout or Pentecost, which means 50, has a long tradition which continues in the Jewish religion today. It occurs 50 days after Passover, and is the celebration of the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai. Thousands of people from many

different nations gathered back then as they do today, for the great festival of Pentecost in Jerusalem.

But back then, they must have had trouble understanding each other – for even though they shared the same faith, they didn't share the same language. And God knew there was a whole world who didn't know about the life and ministry and death and resurrection of God's son; a whole world who did not know about this man Jesus of Nazareth, who spoke about God personally, who enjoyed eating and drinking with unpretentious and impious people, who could miraculously heal others, but who himself was tortured and killed and rose from the dead; a whole world who didn't know about the gift of eternal life. So God decided to do something about that, on that particular day of Pentecost.

And just like when Moses ascended the mountain to stand before God - and fire and wind, thunder and lightning surrounded him; a thick cloud hovered over the mountain, with smoke going up from the top; the sound of heavenly trumpets, and the voice of God gave Moses the 10 commandments – just like what happened all those years ago - - now on that day of Pentecost, in that small room, among the followers of Jesus, the spirit came again. Suddenly the apostles of Christ heard a noise; it filled the entire room; so loud was the roar of wind that it sounded like a tornado – they covered their ears, peeked out through their fingers, and saw streams that looked like tongues of fire or light dancing through the air, pouring down upon them. God was in their midst.

And they ran from the house, grabbed people passing by and told these visitors about what they saw and heard and felt. Suddenly they were telling the story that had changed their lives, and telling it so everyone, regardless of their language, could understand. And the people understood them, because by the power of the Holy Spirit, they were able to speak in each person's language. But, of course, some in the crowd heard these frantic followers, speaking different languages, filled with the Holy Spirit, and shouted, "They must be drunk!" They made fun of them, sneered at them! And that is when Peter comes out.

And Peter begins to preach to them – the very first Christian sermon ever. Remember Peter? He was the disciple who when things got rough, denied even knowing Jesus three times! How amazing it is that Peter, now preaches, the very first sermon! His sermon lasted only 3 minutes – wouldn't that be nice - but a few thousand people were converted and baptized that day because of it! Must have been quite a sermon!

When the day was over, the church was born and the meaning of Pentecost had been fulfilled. The message was clear, it is not enough that we simply know the commandments of God; we need to live by them. How do we do this? As the story continues, it tells us how the people then spent time together in worship, in their homes, praising God and helping other people. That day, the spirit descended upon everyone and enabled them all to break through barriers of language and culture, and brought them into one community of worshippers of Christ.

And the message spread. From Jerusalem into Judea, Samaria, up through Turkey to Greece, on into Italy, through Germany and France, then over to the British Isles by 480 A.D. From Jerusalem, eastward and south into India and then far away to China by the 9<sup>th</sup> Century. By ship from the ports of Spain to Florida in the 1500s, and from the ports of Holland and England to northeast of America in the early 1600s. The message spread even to Westerly, RI and the gathering of this church in the 1950s!

On the day of Pentecost, the church was born, but let's be clear, it wasn't the day the Holy Spirit was born. The Holy Spirit was just revealed in a new way. The Holy Spirit was always present, the trinity wasn't ever separate – God always was and always is the creator, redeemer, sustainer – father, son, spirit. God isn't three separate gods; it's just that through different events in our time, not God's time, our time, God has been revealed to us in three distinct ways. God created heaven and earth and all of life as we know it through God's power of creation – but remember in our Genesis story it is the spirit of God who moves over the face of the waters and breathes life into everything.

In Jesus Christ, God's word became flesh and dwelt among us so that we could more fully recognize God as the redeemer, the love which forgives and promises us eternal life, but remember Jesus was conceived by – the Holy Spirit, the same spirit who descended visibly upon him, in the symbol of a dove when he was baptized, and it was the spirit within Christ that made all things new through his Resurrection.

On that day of Pentecost, God's spirit came again and gave us the language of worldwide understanding, and a story to tell, the story of Jesus. And we need to keep on telling the story because this story has power – power to free the oppressed, challenge injustice, heal the wounded, honor the poor, comfort the suffering. To be baptized and become part of a church is to be continually filled with the Holy Spirit; to be open to its transforming power.

The Holy Spirit is how the church survives. Every time we gather, we are God's classroom waiting to be taught by the spirit. The Spirit of God speaks to us all the time, through those little subconscious feelings of right and wrong behavior, through the voice and actions of the many people we are in relationship with, through our worship, our prayer, our song of praise. The spirit is here folks, at work all around us. The spirit is here, in this church, in our homes, and our hearts. We just need to be open to it.

A few years ago, a pastor I know wrote a book about the church of today and specifically about the difference between being a Rowboat Church and a Sailboat Church. A Rowboat church believes as long as the church is able to keep rowing, we are okay. Rowing means we are in control, we get the job done. But rowing is not moving forward. A sailboat church believes the spirit of God is leading us and we search for the places she is at work and join her there. We know we cannot make the wind blow, but we can tap into the spirit and catch the wind of the spirit. (1) Spreading the good news of Jesus, being open to where the spirit is moving this church, moving each of us, is what this day is all about.

Years ago I took a Confirmation Class on a Spiritual Pilgrimage to Iona. The Isle of Iona, off the coast of Scotland, is believed to be the birthplace of the Presbyterian Church. This island is 1 mile wide and 3 1/2 miles long and there isn't a whole lot on the island but an Abbey, a school, a Christian Community Center, a post office, a Youth Hostel, a grocery store, and the ruins of a Nunnery. People travel there to live and worship in community. So, picture a group of high school kids there – no cell service, no TV, no Wi-Fi, all we did all day was worship – twice! - hike, write in our journals, cook, eat, and be in Community.

One afternoon I asked the youth to get their journals and spend one hour by themselves. One hour. They could take a walk, write in their journal, sleep, whatever they wanted, but they had to be alone and in silence for that hour. And then began their questions – “how long? We can't talk? All by ourselves? No phones, no internet, no TV and now you want us to what – be

alone?!" They looked terrified! So, I repeated those three words of advice I gave to you, "just be open". "What does that mean", they asked, "just be open?"

"Just be open", I said, "because you never know when the truth of all that I speak about, will become clear and you will know and be known and be changed". "Yea, okay, whatever" they said. Later that day one of the youth – you know the type – the clown of the group – always cracking a joke, having that gift of making something ordinary really hilarious when describing it – like after every meal when I would walk out from paying the bill with a mound of mints he would squeal, "mother bird, what have you got for us today?" - well, he comes up to me and almost in a whisper tells me he needs to talk to me. So we separate ourselves and he begins to describe his hour alone.

He states, "I was walking on the rocks along the shore, just listening to the wind and the waves and was, you know, praying, and I began to feel something – like a calmness . . ." I said, "peace?" "Yea, I was at peace! And then I felt kind of like I was being carried, like I was walking along the rocks but could barely feel my feet. Then I sat down and wrote all kinds of stuff that just flowed out. What was that?!" "That", I told him, "is what happens when you are just open to the spirit". The spirit of God moves in and out and flows where it will and no one knows where it comes from or where it goes, where it will guide you, move you, change you.

So people of God, all those gathered in this church in this time and place, on this day of Pentecost – just be open to the power of the spirit because God was, God is, God will be. God isn't done, Jesus isn't done, the Holy Spirit isn't done.

When Jesus was raised from the dead, no one knew how to talk about it, no one had the courage, then the Holy Spirit came and they had the speech. We too are to talk about God in a language people understand. We too must use the voice God has given us, the gifts God has given us, the loving arms God has given us and speak of that love, demonstrate that love, and find our place to use our gifts in God's church. The gifts of wisdom, understanding, discernment, courage, knowledge, piety, wonder and awe, and the gift of faith. What is your gift and what does it mean to you?

So come, Holy Spirit, open our eyes, our ears, our mouths, our arms, as we open ourselves to the power of your spirit this day and every day. Come spirit of the living God, fall afresh upon us. Amen.