

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Pentecost Sunday
Sunday, May 28, 2023
10am

Primary text: John 20:19-23 (NRSVUE)

Supporting text: Acts 2:1-21 (NRSVUE)

Theme: "He Breathed on Them"

[prayer]

Today we have a tale of two Pentecosts.

The first is the familiar story from Acts that we revisit each year: fire from heaven, a mighty rushing wind, the babble of many voices.

The second is a story from the Gospel of John. We heard it before, at the beginning of Eastertide. Jesus is dead. The disciples are huddled in grief and fear in someone's house, when suddenly Jesus appears among them. "Peace," he says.

The church year is like a pendulum, swinging this way, then that. We spend this half in the high holy days of Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter – telling the story of Jesus. We spend the other half in Ordinary Time, telling the story of the Church and growing in the everyday work of being a disciple. At the transition point is Pentecost. This is where the story shifts from Jesus to the Church.

In Luke-Acts, Pentecost happens fifty days after Easter. Luke's account of Pentecost in Acts 2 is a burning bush moment, a mountaintop experience, a theophany – God supernaturally breaking into our world and permanently transforming our reality. This Pentecost is loud, chaotic, powerful, ecstatic. When we speak wistfully of spiritual revival, this is probably the moment we have in mind. *Lord, listen to your children praying! Lord, send your Spirit in this place! Send us love; send us power; send us grace!*

John's Pentecost is very different. It doesn't happen fifty days after Easter. It happens instead on the evening of Jesus' resurrection. For John there is no

distinguishing between Easter and Pentecost. The two events collapse into each other. Jesus inhales life and then exhales the Holy Spirit.

John's Pentecost is not private event; the Holy Spirit arrives behind locked doors, entering fearful hearts. The disciples are keeping the doors locked because they are afraid of the same violence that has just killed their beloved teacher.

Fear is one of the reasons I lock doors. My sister sometimes teases me when I check to make sure our door is locked at night, even when she is the one who did the locking. I turn the handle and pull on the door to make sure it doesn't open. I do this out of habit but also because I think it's wise – it's better to be safe than sorry. But at the root of my action is a tendril of fear that a stranger might break into our home. I have been known to push a box of books in front of the locked door of a new apartment because it makes me feel more secure. Eventually the box gets unpacked and I learn to trust the deadbolt, but the fear still lingers in the back of my mind.

So, I sympathize with the disciples and their fear, a fear that turns to terror when the locked door fails to keep someone out. Suddenly, inexplicably, the man they thought was dead is standing among them. "Peace be with you," he says. But the disciples are anything but peaceful; they think Jesus is a ghost. We know that this moment is not that kind of supernatural activity; this is something else entirely. But the disciples need some proof to reassure them. So Jesus shows them his hands and his side – marks of his crucifixion, marks they can and do touch. *Now* they know that this Jesus is flesh and bone. *Now* they are beginning to grasp that this Jesus has been raised from the dead.

John's gospel teaches that to experience Pentecost, we must also experience the Risen Jesus. Before we can receive the Holy Spirit, we must believe in the new life that Jesus offers. The Greek verb for 'to breathe on' – *emphysaō* – occurs just once in the New Testament, right here in John's gospel: "He breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (v. 22). This exhale of breath is the same breath that God breathes into the lungs of the first human being in Genesis: "Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (2:7 NRSVUE).

The breath that Jesus breathes on his disciples is the breath of a new reality, a new creation. One commentator remarks that his breath “reeks of resurrection.”¹ What do you think resurrection smells like? I imagine something like the way the earth smells after it rains, or the scent of fresh cut grass, or the top of a newborn baby’s head. Resurrection smells like new life. Jesus breathes on the disciples and his exhale is a breath of fresh air, flinging wide that locked door. In rushes a cool, clean breeze, blowing away the stench of their sweat and stress and fear. And with that breath of fresh air comes peace. It is a peace that passes all understanding (Phil 5:7). This peace cannot be created, only received. The disciples can receive this peace because they believe in the Risen Jesus. Their minds have yet to understand what has happened, but their bodies and their spirits are set free *from* their fear *into* the new reality.

With that new reality comes a mission. Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (v. 21). The Father sent Jesus to demonstrate God’s love to a world suffering from fear, distrust, and fragmentation. Now Jesus sends the disciples to demonstrate the same love. “I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other” (John 13:34 NLT). This is the single commandment that defines God’s kingdom: Our love for each other, for our neighbors, should mirror the love that God has for us.

This experience of love shapes the new reality that is at the heart of Pentecost. Fifty days after Jesus breathes on them, some of the disciples, including Peter, are gathered in Jerusalem for the Day of Pentecost. Pentecost was originally a Jewish harvest festival called Shavuot (shah-voo-OAT), as well as a celebration of the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai and the birth of Israel as a nation. The disciples have gathered with other Jews from across the Near East and Mediterranean to celebrate this special day in their nation’s history. But unlike these other Jews, the disciples are celebrating Pentecost in a new, post-resurrection reality. They have met the Risen Jesus and they have received the Holy Spirit.

So, when God comes down like fire, and the Holy Spirit blasts through the house where they are assembled, they understand what this moment means. They are not afraid; their hearts have been prepared. As the diverse crowd of Jews gathers around them, astonished at hearing their native tongues, Peter stands to preach the Gospel. He proclaims to the crowd how God’s love has been fulfilled in the life,

¹ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/lectionary/may-28-pentecost-john-2019-23>

death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. Luke records that three thousand people were baptized after Peter finished preaching. These people then went home to their communities and formed the first house churches. And so, the Church was born.

Like the disciples, Pentecost begins in our hearts whenever God's peace replaces our fear. While Luke's account is a more dramatic Pentecost experience, the Gospel would not have been proclaimed and those three thousand people baptized if Peter and the other disciples were still huddled in fear behind a locked door. Whether she comes as a rushing wind or as a sighing breath, the Holy Spirit blows away the fear that keeps us from living into and sharing the new reality of God's kingdom.

We are living in a time of great fear, mistrust, and fragmentation. This fear is behind the policies that target minority groups, the poor, and the oppressed, and the rhetoric that stokes our anger and aggression toward them. But our mission to share the Good News of God's love with our neighbors cannot be accomplished from a place of fear. If we fear our neighbor, we cannot love our neighbor. Our mission can only be accomplished when we allow the Holy Spirit to blow away our fear and replace it with the peace that Jesus offers. This peace assures us that no power on this earth, nor nothing else in all of creation, can separate us from the love of God that we have in Jesus (Rom 8:38-39). And when we know we are loved by God, we can love others without fear.

Before we pray for a revival of the Holy Spirit in our church, we must first pray for an experience of the Risen Jesus in our hearts. We must pray that Jesus will appear behind our locked doors. Breathe on us, breath of God! Blow away our mistrust and hatred of people who look or think differently than us. Blow away our cynical thoughts and judgmental attitudes. Blow away our fear of losing privilege, our fear of losing power, our fear of dying. Fill us with your peace! Fill us with new life! Make us vessels of your hope, peace, and love. Teach us to love each other and love our neighbors from the strong center of your peace – a peace that passes all understanding.

Friends, this is what a new Pentecost will look like: A church that is so grounded in the peace of Jesus, we are no longer afraid to love like Jesus. May it be so. Amen.