

Breathing Fire

[Acts 2:1-21](#)
[1 Corinthians 12:3b-13](#)
[John 20:19-23](#)
[Psalm 104:25-35, 37](#)

The principal image for the day of Pentecost, as evidenced by today's color, is fire. Fire is the outward and visible form of combustion. When science teachers explain fire to children, they use the fire triangle. For fire to combust, three things must be in place: heat, oxygen, and fuel. To give this image handles, trinitarians might imagine God as the heat, the Spirit as the oxygen, and Jesus as the fuel. Fire appeared on the heads of the disciples when the church was born as an outward display of an internal reality. God's people were joining Christ, being brought into the life of God, and the heat and energy that poured forth from those flames still burns and illumines the world through us.

Today's readings are full of imagery and references that tie the whole story of the Bible together. The story begins in Genesis. At creation it is God's spirit, God's breath, that hovers over the water before forming our world. Then God bends down over the human shaped dirt and breathes that same breath into its nostrils to animate its life.

The story quickly becomes repetitive. God provides for the humans, they disobey the limits of the provision, in shame they hide from God, but God goes after them, rescues them, makes new provisions for them to flourish, and then they transgress those boundaries again. And again, God goes after them. When they leave the garden, God protects them with a flaming sword to guard the Tree of Life so they wouldn't live with death forever. Moses encounters God in the burning bush. It is a pillar of fire that leads him and the Israelites to freedom from Egypt. The fire of God burns on Sinai when Moses receives the commandments. Fire consumes the sacrifices of God's people for generations until Christ **becomes** the flame through which light is brought to the people living in darkness. And at Pentecost, that same fire appeared as divided tongues on the heads of Jesus' followers, filling them with God's spirit, and empowering **them**

to become light bearers. In all these stories, every time humans disobeyed God, it was God who went after them, inviting them back into relationship, restoring their dignity and design.

Today's Psalm is a rich recitation of the wonders of God's creation. It says, "You send forth your Spirit, and they are created; and so you renew the face of the earth". When Jesus breathes on the disciples, it is the creation story once more. This is new creation language, participation in resurrection life. We now have access into work that is sanctified and animated by the life of God breathed through us. For thousands of years the Hebrew people had been anticipating Eve's promise, that one day her offspring would crush the serpent's power. Jesus did that! Jesus' work restored what humanity broke and fulfilled the ancient promise. Because Christ conquered death through the resurrection, we have access back into relationship with God. We are now fire and wind people. We are representatives of Christ and God's finished work of redemption, filled with and moving from the fire and breath of God's spirit. The church is now the public face of the ministry of reconciliation, naming forgiveness, and offering peace.

Episcopalians tend to have a complicated relationship with the Holy Spirit. We like our red altar cloths and we really like church, so celebrating the church's birthday is fun. But we prefer for fire to stay neatly contained within the bounds of the candles **we** light and precisely place. We like the Holy Spirit as long as she sits up straight in her pew and behaves appropriately. The problem is that fire and wind are sort of marked by their wild and unpredictable behavior. If **Episcopalians** had written the story of Acts, Peter would have been the only one speaking and there wouldn't have been the ruckus of so many languages. Everyone would simply have gained the ability to understand **Peter's** language. But that is not what happened. It was a chaotic and unsettling scene, so much so that people assumed these folks were drunk. This event was far from orderly and dignified.

Like everything else about today's readings, this story is functioning on multiple levels. In Genesis, the people all spoke one language, but they used that language to challenge God's authority. It was God who divided the languages and separated the people. Again, like the

other stories, this was a means of salvation. God rescued them from themselves, but there was a cost. Pentecost was God's way of healing and dignifying the division that happened at the Tower of Babel. Episcopalians may like everything about worship to conform to the decorum and solemnity of our liturgy, but God is less concerned with our comfort and structure than in the untamed freedom of the Spirit's power. God expressed divinity through diversity in creation and in recreation at Pentecost. God's presence is marked by the sharing of power throughout that diversity, restoring, healing, and reconciling in unpredictable ways.

If we are going to take these stories seriously, we must subordinate our comfort to the active and present life of God in and through us. Paul says that through the spirit, we are all baptized into one body. We are one living organism. And "to each of us is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good". The word manifestation means disclosure or revelation. In other words, each of us has been given something unique **to us** that is meant to clearly indicate the presence of God for the rest of us. It is the spirit who activates that work, but it is our function to make that thing evident to others. The Spirit distributes gifts across the whole body, across lines like culture, ethnicity, and national origin, lines we have historically used to exclude people rather than recognize them as equal gift-bearers. Together, as one body, we have what we need to be Christ in the world. This is the purpose of the church. But, if we wish to join that work, we must be willing to let the wind freely and powerfully blow among us.

Immediately after Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into the newly formed church, he tells them that the Holy Spirit's work through them would be demonstrated through the forgiveness and retention of sin. The whole story from Genesis illustrates a God who repeatedly and faithfully observes the brokenness of humankind's sinful choices and still moves towards us, offering us reconciliation, and healing. As people activated by the living fire of the Spirit, it is now our work to participate in that same offering of healing and reconciliation. This passage in John has sometimes been used as a way for Christians to justify gatekeeping. But the whole story of the Bible shows God's desire is to mend and restore. We do not condemn others. The Holy Spirit

through us works to honestly name where restoration exists and where reconciliation has not yet completed its work. -----

Before Jesus breathed on the disciples, he showed them his wounds. He did not do that to condemn them. He had just greeted them with peace. He is offering them forgiveness. He showed them his wounds and then he said it again, “peace be with you”. The offered peace means the end of blame; he is not taking offense at their failures; forgiveness means to leave something behind. The very next thing he says is “as the Father has sent me, so I now send you”. The peace he offered to them was intended to be shared with the world. For John, salvation, reconciliation, and healing are always relational. When he speaks of forgiveness, it is not from abstract sin, but our propensity to cling to distance from God and one another. Forgiveness is an invitation back into communion, into the Body of Christ, the life of God, with the people of God. Occasionally we may need to name where alienation still exists. Genuine healing requires honesty. And once fractures are named, Jesus, our healer, can repair and restore. Paul says, “we were all made to drink of one Spirit”. It is that same Spirit who heals, unifies, and empowers us all.

The Spirit may disrupt our comfy version of peace, but Jesus wasn’t crucified, raised and ascended to comfort our complacency. Some of us are uncomfortable with the uncontrollable wildness of fire. Some imagine that healing, miracles, prophecy, and speaking in tongues, can’t be real or certainly don’t happen today. For others, honest truth-telling about legitimate fractures are the issues that heighten our discomfort. But we are people of fire and wind, of resurrection and reconciliation. And we exist to make the life of God manifest on this earth. Jesus gave us the Spirit, in all God’s unadorned power, to bring the world legitimate and lasting peace.

The living, burning, blowing, life of the Spirit is evidence of God’s **faithful** pursuit of the human heart. May we be a church willing to be moved by that Spirit, so the world can be drawn with us into the life of God.

