

SERMON : PENTECOST 2020 - BREATH OF GOD

MAY the words of my mouth and the meditations in our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. <Amen>

Every year, it's the same problem. Pentecost Sunday - the celebration of the Church's birthday, the day that the Christian Church was actually brought into existence - and what does a preacher have to say on this day? I COULD tell you the story of Pentecost and how a ragtag group who had, more or less faithfully followed Jesus during His earthly ministry, gathered together and were imbued with the Holy Spirit and empowered for their ministry - but that would merely repeat what Luke just told us in the reading we had from the Acts of the Apostles. There's nothing cryptic about St. Luke's telling of this story. So what do I have to add? Hmmmmmm

The ancient Jewish idea of the Spirit of God was expressed in the Hebrew word, "Ruah," which literally means "breath." So, in the first book of the Bible, in the first chapter, in only the second line, when the author of Genesis says that the "earth was formless and empty. Darkness was on the surface of the deep. The wind of God was hovering on the surface of the waters." the word for "wind" is ruah - breath. Literally, the breath of God was the animating element in the earth's creation.

When the Hebrew Bible (what we call the Old Testament) was translated into Greek, "ruah" was translated as pnauma, the word from which we get the word pneumonology (the study of the breathing system) and the word pneumonia. So in Acts, when we hear of the "rush of a violent wind," that word is also a variant of pnauma. Another instance of the breath of God at work.

When we read in John's Gospel that Jesus breathed on the disciples and told them that He was giving them the Holy Spirit, it is a variant of the word pnauma, the breath of God - the Spirit of God blown through the world to give it life.

The Holy Spirit - the breath of God - is a powerful and unpredictable force. Kim and I survived Cyclone Rona, a category 5 that smashed through Port Douglas when we lived in Queensland, Australia, so I know the wind can do indescribable damage. But as any good sailor will tell you, you also cannot get anywhere without the power of the wind.

In the classic 1939 film, The Wizard of Oz, a powerful wind, God's ruah if you will - in the form of a tornado - comes into Dorothy Gale's drab, dull life and it lifts her out of her place, spins her around, disorients her and drops her smack in the middle of a new world, where she has a very important mission to accomplish.

In this new world, nothing is the same as it had been before the wind came. There is beauty and wonder the likes of which Dorothy has never seen before, but there is also danger. As Dorothy is faced with these new dangers, she also meets others who have exactly the gifts she needs - wisdom, compassion and courage. And in the end, Dorothy and her new friends accomplish an incredibly unlikely mission.

The Wizard of Oz is an interesting analogy for the modern Church.

We - and here I am talking not only about our faith communities in Arrowtown, Glenorchy, and Queenstown, but the entire Anglican Communion and the greater Christian Church world-wide - often find ourselves living drab, colourless lives without any real purpose. We sometimes seem to go around, day after day, like Dorothy and her Aunt Em and Uncle Henry, just doing the tasks that need to be done, having no vision or desire for anything of greater significance; anything huge and outside ourselves.

Sure we've been keeping the doors open and lights on. We clean the place and conduct services when and how we're supposed to. We teach Church doctrine and talk about the Kingdom of God.

But what if the Holy Spirit comes in a completely unexpected and perhaps even frightening form; what if we are confronted by the ruah, the pnauma, the animating wind of God that nobody could have predicted? THEN our world can be transformed, if we are receptive to the power of the breath of God and if we are not too afraid to change and let it blow us where it will.

But if Jesus gave the Holy Spirit to be with the Disciples when He left, and if the Holy Spirit empowered each of them - if we proclaim the power of the breath of God at each of our baptisms, then by definition, the Holy Spirit is already here. So what do we do to open up and let God's ruah run wild in our lives? I've got a three-point plan for us all.

First, read Scripture. Read the Bible so that you can make informed decisions about how God works in the world by reading about how God worked in the past. And if you have questions, ask - we'll study together.

Second, pray. You're not required to spend hours in contemplative silence. God just wants to be in communication with us. We have that communication through prayer. Even if it is just five minutes a day, talk with God about what's going on in your life, and pray for others who are in need. There's no magic formula, just talk with God - even if it's all done silently. God will hear you.

Thirdly, every day, try to do something thoughtful for someone else. Loving your neighbour as yourself means wanting good things for your neighbour. Doing something nice for someone else does not have to require much time or effort, just thinking outside yourself.

Do these things every day and after a while they will become habits.

By doing that which God has commanded, you are opening yourself up and making yourself available to the ruah, the powerful, animating spirit of God. You're opening the gate and saying, "Breathe on me, breath of God."

But be careful! When you make yourself available to the power of God's breath, you have no more control over where it blows than Dorothy did.

There will be times when you too will feel spun around and disoriented.

There will be times when you'll scratch your head and say to yourself, "I'm not in Kansas anymore."

But also, like Dorothy, you'll be surrounded by the amazing gifts of God's ruah in the world, and you'll slowly discover that God's spirit was right there all the time, it was always right there within you, a power you could tap into at will. All you needed was the desire and the guts to try.

Edwin Hatch's wonderful hymn, Breathe on Me, Breath of God, puts the call to be open to God's Spirit this way,

Breathe on me, breath of God,
Blend all my soul with Thine,
Until this earthly part of me
Glows with Thy fire divine.

May it be so. Let the breath of God into your life. Let go and live in the God's gracious power.

Ahua tuku i enei kupu, I runga e te Ingoa o te Atua, te Matua, te Tama me te Wairua Tapu.

I offer these words, in the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

AMEN