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Trinity Episcopal Church

Acts 2: 1 – 21
1 Corinthians 12: 3b – 13

Psalm 104: 25 – 35, 37
John 20: 19 – 23

Welcome to the Feast of Pentecost! Next to the Feast of the Resurrection (Easter) and the Feast of the Incarnation (Christmas), Pentecost is the third most holy day on our Christian calendar. And today, we get a two-for-one special. We get both Luke and John's versions of Pentecost.

Luke's version comes in our first reading from Acts. It is fifty days after the resurrection and Jesus' disciples are gathered in Jerusalem as per Jesus' instructions. Over the first forty days, his friends and followers were privy to many appearances by Jesus. Then, on Day Forty, Jesus reminds his followers one more time to wait for God's gift of the Holy Spirit, and then, without further ado, he ascends into the heavens.

Now, ten days after the Ascension, it is the Jewish Feast of Pentecost. The word "Pentecost" means 'fifty days' in Greek, and it is a feast that falls fifty days after the Passover. Along with Passover and the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles, Pentecost is also one of the three major feast days on the *Jewish* calendar. That is why so many Jews from the diaspora are visiting in Jerusalem. They are here to celebrate at the Temple.

Jesus' disciples are gathered together in someone's home, waiting. Waiting for what, or for how long, they don't exactly know. Whatever it is, it will be in God's time. Meanwhile, they sit around, somewhat despondently, wondering how they can go on in life without Jesus right there with them.

Suddenly, a hurricane force wind comes ripping in through the open windows and doors, whistling around the corners, rattling shutters, and gathering up little dirt devils. The disciples' eyes are wide and surprised as they are instantly stirred out of their moping and lethargy. Like a match striking sparks, the wind whips up something like dancing flames in and around and over top of the people. A giddiness overtakes them all as they breathe in this delightful wind, spirit, breath – ruach in Hebrew, pneuma in Greek – this breath of God. Punch-drunk on the Holy Spirit, they dance and sing and make such a general ruckus that people out on the street begin to notice.

Having breathed in great gulps of this God-breath, the men and women in the house are then hugged and squeezed by the Spirit, like a holy Heimlich maneuver, so that the breath comes back out in words that they have never known, let alone spoken before. The Jews of the diaspora out on the street can't believe their ears – these hicks from the sticks of Galilee are fluent in languages from all over the Mediterranean! They are waxing eloquent about the incredible and mighty things that God has done through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

It is so powerful an experience that while the day starts off with only about 120 of Jesus' followers, it finishes with three thousand more having been baptized! One of Prairie Home Companion's Powder-Milk Biscuits' taglines is that they 'give shy persons the strength they need to get up and do what needs to be done.' Well that must be something like what the Holy Spirit does here. It totally transforms the nervous, scared and reluctant disciples into people with a sense of direction and purpose...people with a message...people with a voice to proclaim that message. Gulping deeply of that God-breath transforms them. As Barbara Brown Taylor writes, the Holy Spirit enters these men and women in the same way, and for the same purpose, that it had entered Mary. It is time for God to be

born again, not through one individual but through many. Into a body of believers willing to receive this life-giving breath from their Lord and to pass it on, using their bodies to distribute this gift.

In the Gospel for today, we get John's version of Pentecost. There's no point in trying to reconcile Luke and John because they are very different. Instead of being fifty days after Easter, John says it is actually the evening of the resurrection. The evening of the first day of the week. Which perhaps begins a little bell ringing in the back of our minds. What does that phrase remind us of? Oh, yes, the first account of Creation in the book of Genesis.

Like Luke's version, the disciples are together, waffling between grief and hope and confusion regarding the crucifixion and the odd reports of the empty tomb that morning. In John, the men and women are actually hidden away behind locked doors because they are afraid of the Temple leadership. But locked doors are no big deal for the Creator of the Cosmos, and so Jesus suddenly appears in the middle of the room with them. Jesus' first gift to them is the gift of peace, "Shalom aleichem," peace be with you. A peace that passes all understanding and perhaps what the disciples themselves need most at this moment. In a heartbeat, the disciples move from fear to rejoicing as they hear his voice and see his wounds. Jesus' next gift is the gift of commissioning, sending, giving purpose and meaning to the disciples' lives. And then, instead of a hurricane force wind, Jesus bestows on them the gift of the Holy Spirit as gently as blowing a kiss. And, as in the Lukan version, and in the first story of Creation, God's breath fills the lungs and hearts and minds of Jesus' followers, transforming them, empowering them, enlivening them.

Pentecost is what completes Easter. Without Pentecost, Easter would leave us with the anguish, the loneliness, of saying farewell to a risen Christ who returns to glory. Without Pentecost, we, Jesus' followers, would be left bereft and orphaned in this world, with nothing but fond memories of what once was. Without Pentecost, we, the Body of Christ, the Church, would be left to face the world unarmed and ill-equipped for the task given to us. But with Pentecost, all that changes.

With Pentecost, Easter's Christ returns with the promised Holy Spirit as advocate, comforter, giver of life, sanctifier, teacher, guide, reminder and empowerer. With Pentecost, we, the Church, don't simply celebrate Easter, we participate in it. With Pentecost, Christ says hello, not good-bye, to the Church.

The question for us, perhaps then, is do we still believe in a God who acts like this? Do we still believe in a God who transforms and empowers, who commissions and who acts decisively? Do we believe in a God who blows through closed doors and ignites sparks into flames within our hearts? Or, as Barbara Brown Taylor asks, do we believe in a God who's pretty old and staid, someone to whom we may address our prayers, but not anyone we really expect to change our lives or change the world?

The Holy Spirit is perhaps the most nebulous and hardest part of the Trinity for many of us to wrap our minds around. Both Luke and John are clear that the point of receiving the Holy Spirit is not to give those early disciples (or us) some kind of spiritual or mystical experience, nor is it to set them (or us) apart as somehow 'holier-than-thou.' God's gift of the Holy Spirit is so that we, Jesus' followers, can do in and for this world all that Jesus has shown us how to do. I invite you to begin to reflect on just who and what the Holy Spirit is for you.

Each of you received a slip or two of paper as you came in. They are from Richard Rohr's *The Divine Dance* and are entitled "A Litany invoking the Holy Spirit: 70 Evocative Names for God (if you let

them be).” Let’s take a moment to breathe in deeply that breath of God, allowing it to re-spire, re-spirit us, and to inspire, draw the Spirit into us. And then, as the moment seems right, one at a time, simply stand for a moment and read whatever is on your paper. And then we’ll conclude with this *Litany for the Day of Pentecost*.

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