

## Breath of Heaven

Acts 2:1-13; Genesis 2:4-7

The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights

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Whether you've been around here for a long time, or you've become a believer more recently, you know how we depend on the scripture to help us know who – and whose – we are. And you've noticed, perhaps, that there are some scriptures that we read a lot. Some passages that seem to show up at least once a year, like clockwork: if you came in here after a long nap and Khadija was up front reading, "And suddenly there was with the angel a heavenly host, singing 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace!'", you'd think it was Christmas, right? Similarly, each spring we are used to stumbling in here early one morning and listening to Cheri, or someone like her, read "And he said, 'Do not be afraid; for you seek Jesus of Nazareth. He is not here, but has risen.'"

Christmas and Easter are "shaping days" for the church, aren't they? I mean, many, many people who don't think about their faith all that often are willing to show up on those days and put in an hour or so. We know Christmas and Easter, and are glad to hear those familiar scriptures.

Today is the day of Pentecost. It's the one day in the church year when you'll see the red hangings on the pulpit. And almost every single Pentecost, we read from Acts chapter 2. Pentecost, like Christmas and Easter, is a day that we tend to gather around the same story year after year. But for some reason, we don't know the story as well. We don't send "Pentecost Cards". The story about flaming tongues of fire and spectacular language gifts seems a little odd – although to be honest, it's no more unbelievable than a virgin birth or a resurrected messiah.

Unlike Christmas or Easter, Pentecost was a day that the disciples already celebrated before they came to follow Christ. It was one of the main feasts of the Jewish year, also called the "Feast of Weeks", when people from all over the world would crowd into Jerusalem and celebrate with thanksgiving. During this time, people would bring their "first fruits" and offer them to the Lord. As I've mentioned on other occasions, "first fruits" is risky giving. When you offer your first bushel of barley to the Lord, you're trusting that there won't be a hailstorm that wipes out the rest of the crop before you can harvest it. When you bring the first of the grapes from your vine, you're counting on the fact that the frost will hold off until you get back home and pick the rest. The Feast of Pentecost called God's people to give in a risky way – to celebrate God's abundance. Interestingly enough, there was also a significant emphasis on sharing with the needy during this feast.

At this particular Pentecost, God keeps the promise that he'd made on Easter. Do you remember the folks hiding out in that upper room and the risen Christ appears to them? He taught them, he ate with them, and he told them

"Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." (Luke 24:46-49).

Jesus promises that something will happen, and then there are seven weeks of silence. The disciples must have been asking each other, "What are we supposed to do now?" I don't know what they said to each other, but I know what they did: they acted like women and men who had faith. They kept the festival. In the midst of their grief and their joy and their uncertainty, they went to worship. They took part in the Feast of Weeks.

And look what happens here: remember, the Feast of Weeks is a harvest festival, a festival wherein the farmers took the first fruits that had appeared and offered them to God, trusting that God would somehow bless the rest of their crops, right? They gave the first small handful to the Lord, trusting Him for the rest. Here on this particular Pentecost, who do we see gathered in prayer? The first disciples. The first of those who believed that Jesus was who he said he was. And what are they doing? They are offering themselves to God in worship and in prayer. And in this, God transforms this group of disciples – this “first-fruits of faith” – and gives birth to the Christian church.

I'd like to talk for a moment about how it is that God goes about transforming the believers. What is the means by which this happens? God sends the Holy Spirit. In case you've forgotten your ancient Greek, I'll remind you that there's one word for “spirit”, “wind”, and “breath”. In Greek, it's all πνευμα. How did God transform the believers on Pentecost and give birth to the church? By filling them with His spirit. With his breath.

And *that* leads us all the way back to the beginning of the book. We spent a lot of time back in September reading through the story of God's work in creation and the gifts of life that God gave in the Garden. And in the passage you saw a few moments ago, how does God bring life to human beings? God took all of the raw materials that he needed to make a man and he formed them together, and then he breathed into them, and then they became alive. God sent his πνευμα, and Adam was, right?

Consider what happened during that Pentecost feast. God took all the raw materials for a church – the disciples – and filled them with his breath – his πνευμα, his spirit – and the church was.

Because of that, the Christian church has always observed Pentecost as a sort of a birthday. That's not meant to say that God didn't have a people before the Holy Spirit was poured out on these men and women – after all, haven't we said that this is what the story of Abraham is all about – God calling a people to himself? But this is definitely a new expression of God's call, and a new way of understanding what it means to live in faith. The church is born, miraculously, as God breathes the breath of heaven into a group of people who have come to know and trust his intentions for their lives. And, filled with this breath, they are able to share the miracle with the world around them.

I noted in the June issue of the church newsletter one idea about the miracle of Pentecost – how it is a miracle of hearing. Twice in this brief passage we see the question, “how is it that we hear in our own language?” People hear, and are heard. And the world – and eternity changes – because of the hearing.

Many times, I'm here exhorting you to be a proclaimer. To be an activist in and for your faith. Here I am wearing this green wristband that implores you to save Darfur. I've got a letter on my desk that one of you gave me asking us to learn more about the government's intentions concerning the Marriage Act. Often I want to ask you to use your voice to change people's behavior regarding some great and worthy cause, from abortion to hunger to materialism.

Not today. Today, I'm asking God to shape us into a community that hears. I'm asking God to breathe into us his πνευμα, his spirit. And I will trust that when the spirit comes in new and fresh ways, that we will be empowered to be those who give the gift of listening and hearing to the people around us.

In fact, I'd like to give you homework for this week. We have come into this room asking God to refresh us. We have sought the inflowing of the Spirit, we will ask for a spirit of power to come upon us as we share in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. What will we do with all of this refreshment, inflowing, and power?

Take it outside, folks. This week, I want to challenge you to engage in a spiritual discipline of listening. I want you to ask God, through the Holy Spirit, to empower you to really hear what your neighbor is saying. Not so you can invite that neighbor to church (although I hope you've already done that). Not so you can ask your neighbor to support the Camp & Conference Fund, or the Malawi Mission Fund, or the Open Door (although that would be sweet, on another occasion).

Here's what I'm asking you to do: spend time with another person – one you don't live with – and listen to them. Spend 20 minutes or an hour on the porch, or at Rita's, or while watching the Little League game. Listen. Ask leading questions, like "how long have you been in your home?" or "what do you like about living in the neighborhood?" or "what is it like for you when you go to work?" If you really want to offer someone the gift of listening, say, "You know, I'll be spending some time in prayer later on. Is there any way that I can be praying for you today?"

Let me tell you something: sitting down with your neighbor might not change the world. In fact, your neighbor might think that something is weird about your willingness to sit down and listen. Remember how our Acts 2 reading ended? With the local population suggesting that the disciples were drunk. That's going to happen sometimes. Who cares? Your call is to ask God's Spirit to empower you to listen with godly concern to the people who are around you.

I want to ask you to do that before we gather again next week. And I'd like to ask you to send me a note or an e-mail, or give me a phone call, when you've finished. Not because I'm "checking up" on you. Please. If we start keeping score, we're all sunk. No, I want you to touch base with me after you do this because I think that the reflection will be helpful for you, and who knows – maybe we can join in prayer together for your friend.

The message of Scripture is plain: God intends to use the church to change the world. Let's take our next step in faithfulness by being gracious to the people who share the journey with us.

I will close by announcing that in the weeks to come, I'll be working with the Evangelism Committee to do some intentional training in one on one listening skills. Our hopes for this include crafting a team of people who are willing to visit other people in their homes and listen to them answering questions like this. There are people in this room that God is calling to be on some sort of a visiting team. There is nobody in this room that God is not calling to be holy listener in the lives of the people around us.

May the breath of God fill you as you dwell amongst those he loves this week. Amen.