

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Sunday of Pentecost - Year A

Week 12 of Quarantine

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Acts 2:1-21

Psalm 104:24-34, 35b

I Corinthians 12:3b-13

John 20:19-23

### **Gospel**

The Holy Gospel according to St. John:

19When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

20After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

The Gospel of our Lord

## **Prayer**

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

## **The Holy Spirit**

Good morning! Today, Pentecost, is often called the birthday of the Church. But before we can get there, I want to share a story that I hope will help us to see the power and majesty of not just this day, but of the Holy Spirit. Our story takes place in WWII, and it's less *one* single story as it is *several* stories. When we think of the stories that took place in WWII we often think of the battles. But it wasn't just troops that fought and died in those wars, but civilians too. We cannot forget about the destruction not just of life, but on things like city infrastructure, buildings, roads and the rest. I'm talking of course about the firebombs that rained down from the sky across places in Germany and Japan. It's not the allies' finest moment, but we saw something that was simply astounding.

At some point in the war the bombings went from targeting only industrial sites but began the wholesale destruction of cities. These became known as firebombs, and the death toll was staggering. It's estimated that the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki killed just under 40,000 people, but in the firebombing of Hamburg, Germany the death toll was over 42,000.

Even the deaths of both Nagasaki and Hiroshima combined fall short of the deadliest firebombing in the history of the world which took place in March of 1945 in Tokyo, Japan, where 120,000-200,000 people were killed.

In order to understand the power of these bombings, we need to understand that the destruction wasn't just limited by the initial explosions themselves. The bombs created small pockets of fire that, as they burned, would merge together with other fires in the city, eventually creating what we call a firestorm. The force and destruction that is capable because of these fires is staggering. In Tokyo, 16 square miles of the city was destroyed. In Hamburg, the fire was so powerful that it became known as Operation Gomorrah, after the story in Hebrew Scriptures where the city was destroyed by fire and brimstone. The heat was so intense that the asphalt of the streets literally began to melt. All told, the allies dropped 2,326 tons of explosives on the city. It was so powerful that it formed a tornado. Wind traveling at around 150 mph swept IN towards the storm from all directions.

Wind rushing... While nothing good can be said about this type of destruction, it does give us one helpful way to look at today's Pentecost story anew: *"<sup>1</sup>When the day of Pentecost had come, [the apostles] were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup>And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like*

*the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”* The rush of a violent wind. While not 150 mph, it’s clear that this moment was equally as powerful.

This past Monday during our Zoom Bible study I asked our group two questions: What is the Holy Spirit? And what does it do? We seem very comfortable talking about God the Father, and God the Son. I think this is because they can seem more tangible. But when it comes to the Holy Spirit, we become a little confused. John R. Levison writes that: *“In the Bible’s opening words, the Spirit of God hovers over the face of the deep, brooding perhaps like a mothering eagle. In the scriptures closing lines, the Spirit and the bride — the church— offer an invitation to taste the water of life. Between the opening and closing of the Bible’s curtain lies a rich and jagged spiritual terrain to which the Spirit of God lends a measure of focus.”*

So, what is this Spirit of God doing? In the Hebrew Scriptures we find it in the Hebrew word ruakh. The word can mean both Spirit AND wind. It’s what God breathes into us at creation. In the New Testament we shift

from Hebrew to Greek. The word is pneuma, and it is here where we see the otherness of the Spirit in its Greek grammatically neuter form. Throughout the Bible the Holy Spirit serves a variety of functions. In the Torah it serves as a marker of God's "spark" within humanity. In the prophets the Spirit *"develops explosive dimensions when it comes upon Israel's leaders... to empower them to liberate the tribes of Israel..."* We see it in the writings of the Hebrew Scripture alongside Wisdom *"Which embodies the belief that the spirit is the source of wisdom and virtue."* When we move into the New Testament we find it in the Gospels acting as an instigator for the ministry of Jesus, pushing him along his path.

But of all the places we find the Holy Spirit most active, it is within the work of the early Church that we give the greatest credit. If God the Father is creator, and God the Son is reconciler, then God the Holy Spirit is the sustainer. Literally whole books are devoted to the work of the Spirit in the writings of Acts and letters from Apostles like Paul and Peter. But of all the things the Spirit does there is one particular thing that I want to draw our attention towards.

In today's first reading the Holy Spirit descends upon the disciples and then the WHOLE gathering of people in Jerusalem can understand what they say in their own language! Do you realize how amazing that is?

This isn't speaking in tongues. That particular fruit of the Spirit requires someone to translate for the community. What happens is something completely different. The uniqueness of each individual is held up as important. In this moment of understanding we don't become some homogeneous whole, no! We celebrate together our differences.

This is something we are not good at doing, as the death of George Floyd has shown us. Racism and white supremacy continue to have a hold on us, and it's exactly these systems of injustice and hatred that the Holy Spirit works to put to an end. Let me be clear; George Floyd should not have died. He was murdered by someone who betrayed his calling to protect and serve. And if we don't learn how to admit this, how to confess this truth, we will never be able to listen to the voices that the Holy Spirit is using to call us together.

But God does not abandon us. And at this very moment the Holy Spirit is at work in our hearts to bring about change. Something astounding happened that day in Jerusalem, and we can be a part of something equally amazing here today, if only we let the wind of that Holy Spirit guide and direct us. Amen.