



Sermon for Pentecost, May 2020

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

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[Numbers 11:24-30](#) [Psalms 104:25-35,37](#) [Acts 2:1-21](#) [John 20:19-23](#)

This day, Pentecost, is truly the culmination of Easter and the birth of something new. Jesus the Risen One, the Lord of Life, sends the Holy Spirit, and the life-giving fire and breath of God flows through the followers and friends of Jesus with the great message that something new has dawned. It is a new day. All is being made new. A path has opened for everyone. God is in our midst. The day of God is now. God's Spirit is pouring out on us and through us, and we bring you visions and dreams, even in these dark times. Even now, even in the midst of blood, and fire, and smoky mist, this is the coming of God's great and glorious day. Come and see, come and drink, come and breathe, come and receive the fire of God's passionate love!

In case you didn't sense it, I love – completely love – this feast day and this account from the book of Acts. I am taken up in hope and joy every time I hear this, and especially on the Day of Pentecost.

It's a day of new creation. And the power of new creation is shared with us – we share with the Holy Spirit in spreading the power of this new creation, this reclaiming of all things to become all that God has created us to be. New life, new breath, new fire.

This is the vision we need, in a world where people snuff life from each other, where they take the breath from others, where they set upon others' places with destructive fire. Racism and racial hatred are killing us all. The killing of George Floyd by officer Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis, the lying, fake emergency call to 911 by Amy Cooper in New York where she claimed to be being attacked by Christian Cooper (a bird-watcher), the protests that have been mutated and manipulated by different groups including White Nationalists into acts of destruction and rioting – these are nothing short of wicked, willful, sinful acts aimed at destruction of life. It is racial hatred and the sin of smug self-righteousness that fans these destructive flames and chokes life from victims and from the sinners themselves. And these are the forces that assembled to crucify the upstart Jew – even by his own tribes and culture, and also by those “lawless ones” who held power and did the deed. But now, the story turns! This “upstart Jew” has been raised from the dead, and is now ascended as the Lord of All Life – and his power of love is now our power of love. Hear it! Hear it, in every language, for every people in every place! Christ is risen! Life wins!

This is a day of new life. It is the great day of crossing the threshold for the Church – when we come out of hiding and make ourselves known to the world, when the Holy Spirit flows and we follow the flow willingly.

It has been happening through the ages. It will continue on, with or without us. God's Spirit, the Spirit of Life, flows through all creation and all humanity, and stirs us, lures and beckons us, tugs us to new life and new ways of being. So, we hear three stories today of the coming of the Holy Spirit. One from the Torah, from Numbers, when the Hebrew people were in the wilderness and God's spirit came upon the elders so that they spoke great words of truth. Another from the great day in Jerusalem when the disciples burst from their rooms into the streets to speak good news, and when the Holy Spirit gave them power to communicate across the barriers of language and culture. And one from the Gospel of John, when Jesus appears to his disciples in a closed room after his resurrection and breathes on them just as God breathed on the first humans with the breath of life.

So, friends, hang with me while I dig into a few little nuggets in the Gospel. These really jumped out at me as my Lutheran and Presbyterian buddies and I studied the texts earlier this week. So, we're going to do just a bit of Greek here. Just a few nuggets, I promise.

First, "Receive the Holy Spirit." When Jesus says this, the Greek for "receive" here more often is translated in other places as "take" – like taking hold of something. Jesus says this word when giving his disciples the bread – "Take, and eat." Now, he breathes on them and says the same word – "Take" (or "receive"). The word is more active than just passive receiving. This is not an invitation to a passive position, where the disciples are just supposed to sit back and have the Holy Spirit fed to them or infused into them. It is a position of invitation, just as Jesus says when he offers the bread to his disciples. "Take to yourselves and take into yourselves what I am giving you." So, maybe we don't just pray for the Holy Spirit to come and infuse us. We intentionally open ourselves, open the gates to receive, and then take hold of the one we receive.

Second, Jesus says, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained." These are serious words. What are we to make of such responsibility given to us? Let's look at the word for "retained." The Greek word translated here as "retain" also means to seize, to lay hold of, take custody of. It is the same verb used when the soldiers seize or take hold of Jesus, and when they arrest him. So, what happens when we retain the sins of others, or of ourselves? Things get retained. They get stuck. And they don't just get stuck in the others whose sins we are retaining – holding. They get stuck with us, because we are the ones holding them. I think Jesus is telling us to be very cautious with this charge. There may be times when the sins of any should be retained. But that is rare, and should not be treated as a permanent position like a knee upon the neck of someone trying to breathe. The first invitation – and the key message of the new creation – is forgiveness. When we seize and take hold of someone's sins, we ourselves remain occupied and seized. Will we take hold of the freedom of God offered in the Holy Spirit?

Finally, one last little interesting bit from the Gospel of John today. The story is told in the past tense. We are at the scene where Jesus appeared to his disciples, where he breathed on them. But there is one verb that is in the present tense. It is when Jesus speaks. It doesn't get

translated this way, but the Greek word for “he says” is in the present tense. So, here is how this sounds:

Jesus came and stood in the midst, and he says to them, “Peace to you.”

And later, He breathed on them, and he says to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

Hang with me, folks. I think this is really exciting, and really important. All the language around these two sayings of Jesus are past tense. But these two actions of speaking are Jesus speaking in the present tense. All this happened – and in the midst of the story, we are sucked into the moment as the present moment, and Jesus comes right out into the present, to us, and he says “Peace to you,” and “Here, take hold of the Holy Spirit.” These are things that Jesus is always saying – always! In all times and places. Then, to his disciples. Long before, to the elders of the Hebrew people in the wilderness, both inside and outside the tent, inside and outside the camp. Long before that, to all creation as the Spirit of God hovered over the waters, and as humanity was given the breath of life. Jesus Christ, the Lord of Life and Love, is always saying these things. Through the ages, through the suffering ages of the early church in ancient Rome, through the plagues and wars of the Middle Ages, to families and communities across the world, through times of progress and times of regress, in times of great spiritual revival and in times of more uncertainty. Today, even today, across this country that is having trouble finding its way. Today, on the streets of protest. Today, where families mourn deaths from this viral pandemic and from the pandemic of racism. Today, in households and communities of every kind. Everywhere, Jesus comes forth into the present and says, for everyone who is willing to hear and listen, “Peace to you,” and “Receive and take hold of the Holy Spirit.”

The moment is always now. The Holy Spirit’s breaking into our lives is always possible NOW.

Friends, open yourselves. Cast the doors wide open for the Holy Spirit. Let the Spirit flow through you and in you, remaking you. And take the Holy Spirit and follow the flow and fire. You will speak and hear God’s amazing good news.

Amen.