

Sermon for Pentecost Sunday May 31, 2009

What does this mean...then and now?

Act 2: 1-21

Rev. John Benham

To be able to “breathe” is an amazing gift. We know this is true when we see ventilating machines helping our love one’s heal in hopes of breathing normally again. I trust that all of us at different times in our lives have been told to “calm down and just breathe”. I remember cleaning the house as a young teenager and I actually liked vacuuming, and I remember the moment I stopped breathing when my elbow back into my mother’s favourite clock with a beautiful class cover (*the one her mom and dad has given her in celebration of her first employment*) as I watched it drop to the floor in slow motion I thought I had stopped breathing! Thankfully, God blessed me with a gracious mom who helped me to breathe grace back into my lungs!

While on study leave in Atlanta two weeks ago, I was sharing lunch with some friends in ministry and we had invited another pastor who was actually lying on the floor of the sanctuary at the end of worship. I thought this is a different kind of postlude meditation. Little did we know that he was having epileptic challenges. We had just enjoyed a nice lunch with our new friend when Eric began to shake and seated in his church on this outdoor patio began to seizure. I had witnessed my dad’s brain seizure as a child so I tried to remain calm and gently massage and speak to him. Although the EMS took about fifteen minutes to arrive God blessed us with a waitress/life guard who was the ER nurse from heaven as we kept him comfortable. A colleague graciously went to the hospital with him for the afternoon, and we were able to contact his wife back in New York, and as far as I know he was coming along fine. In a second, everything changes.

The Spirit of God is in you, every single breath you take. Breathe in and out as we enter into this story of holy winds and spirit that transforms the lives of the earliest followers of Jesus. By this point in their journey, the disciples might have been breathless themselves. Remember all that has happened in the last 50 days for them; Jesus’ last supper with his friends. His arrest and crucifixion-an event itself accompanied by loud sighs and long wails of grief. Jesus did as he said he would-he left them. He was taken out of their sight and returned to the One from whom he came. It must have been heart wrenching. And so the disciples did what all church people do in times of fear and chaos-they had a meeting!

They busily began to try and get their game plan together. They needed to get organized. They needed to choose more apostles to help them with all the work Jesus had left in their trembling hands. After all, they were now supposed to tell other people

about what God had done in Jesus. It was a daunting mission to the poor, the sick, and the outcasts without Jesus by their side.

Suddenly it just happened. The wind blew through the entire house, filling each of them with a breath that came from somewhere else. The wind, the breath, filled them with a power they did not understand. They had not asked for this breath nor expected it. This power, this breath, this courage just swooped into the room and filled them up in a way they could have never predicted. And with it, they discovered a reserve of strength they did not know they possessed. They came face to face, lung to lung, with the gift of God's Holy Spirit, God's holy breath.

Some in the crowd thought they were drunk. You and I might have assumed the same thing. The crowd had no other way to explain it. But then Peter gave voice to what was happening. And as he preached, I imagine all of these people-people from near and far, strangers and foreigners, young and old, began to breathe deeper. But here's what's at stake for us in this story. While it is a lovely story, a powerful story, we simply cannot keep it contained in the past. God's Spirit still works this way. The Holy Spirit, the breath of God, is at work, here and now today!

A few weeks ago I listened to a wise Methodist preacher named Tony Robinson who was the guest speaker at our Halton Presbytery. Tony really captured the truth of "then" and "now" as I paraphrase him:

Fifty years ago those who attended church were upward and mobile people – now no one cares if you go to church. Then church was where everyone went – now the second best shopping day of the week is Sunday and sports teams consider Sunday morning prime time. Fifty years ago, what a preacher said on Sunday morning was often quoted in the local paper now the town could care less what was said on Sunday morning from the pulpit and sometimes even the congregation! The days when the church was in charge are over, but something new is a foot in that the church of 2009 is probably closer to the church of Acts 2 than in the last few hundred years. We are not sure what tomorrow will bring for our churches, and faith. We're longing for a new breath of Spirit to empower us to have faith in these changing times. These are tough times in all churches but also a time of great opportunity.

I was honoured to gather with about 2,000 preachers from all over North America at the Festival of homiletics in Atlanta, Georgia just over a week ago. It's quite something when you gather that many preachers in one place and then watch us sit on the edge of our pews awaiting each sermon, lecture, and no doubt the great moment of our time together was Bishop Desmond Tutu. As Bishop Tutu looked out from the pulpit at the Peachtree United Methodist he began by saying, "Thank you for your prayers and support because South African was dependent on you for prayer! If I had a magic wand I would wave it over you and make you all South Africans!"

Then the Bishop revealed to us how his people coped with oppression and found ways to breathe deeply in faith. They trust in God, and humour! He said, *“Before we were free we used humour to poke fun at the dehumanizing system of apartheid. We told stories about our Creator who made all of us from the mud and clay and made us by cooking us in the oven, but our Creator lost track of time and some of us came out rather dark and well done. So, God tried again, and became a little anxious about making people overdone, but the next time the people came out underdone. SKIN colour tells me nothing about you. Signs in South Africa would read, “Caution Drive Safely – Natives Crossing” and we would get up in the middle of the night and make a minor change to the signs: “Caution Drive Safely, Natives VERY cross ing”.*

Bishop Tutu ended his sermon with a lighthearted thought and I paraphrase him, *“Racism doesn’t have the last word. Now look at your country. The United States of America has shown the world that anything is possible with the election of President Obama. And isn’t it great now that as you travel the world you know longer have to tell other’s that your Canadian!”*

We are all carriers of God every single breath. If we would only see God in each other then we would bow before each other in awe and breathe deeply in trust and love.