

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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John 20:19-23

"Breath of Jesus"

Between Easter and Pentecost, the church traditionally focuses on the coming of the Holy Spirit. John's Gospel has a good deal to say about the work of the Spirit; it is one of John's main emphases in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and it climaxes in a short passage in John 20. Most NT scholars believe that John's Gospel originally ended at chapter 20, with Thomas' exclamation "My Lord and my God," and John's conclusion that Jesus said and did many other things, but the ones he has written are "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (John 21 would then be a kind of postscript, written at the very end of John's life, to account for the primacy of Peter in the early church, and for the rumor that John would never die).

In what are then the final paragraphs of John's Gospel proper, the risen Jesus appears to his disciples in a locked room, much as described in Luke 24, and shows them his wounded hands and side. Twice he says "Peace be with you," not simply as an everyday Hebrew greeting, *shalom*, but to reassure his frightened disciples that he is not a ghost. They are relieved, in fact overjoyed. Then Jesus says and does three things that will define their lives, and those of all Christians, forever afterwards.

1) *The Commission of the Church*

The first is to commission his disciples, or as we might now say, the Church. "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." What is that about?

Now you will know that the Father sending his Son is a motif that is repeated over and over in John's Gospel; it is, among other things, the foundation of Jesus' authority and of his mission. He has been sent by his Father to "save the world." He has been sent to bring "grace and truth" into the world. He has been sent to bring new life, life from above; he has been sent to bring the forgiveness of sins; he has been sent to "draw all people to himself when he is lifted up."

But now Jesus' work on earth is done. Israel has been redeemed, God's kingdom established; and Jesus is about to send his disciples out to declare this to the world, and through this to redeem people everywhere who respond to Jesus' invitation to enter God's family. But notice: "as the Father sent, I send..." It is not only that the Church must declare what Jesus has done, they must carry out *their* mission in the way Jesus carried out *his* mission.

How was that? With the authority of the Father, with truth and grace, with love and forgiveness, with unity and service. If the world is to be convinced that Jesus is the redeemer of the world, the world must see in

his Church the marks of Jesus' presence, the grace and forgiveness, that attracted so many people to him while he walked the roads of 1st C. Israel. So giving attention to "the least and the lost," placing value on women and children and other "insignificant" people, opposing hypocrisy and cynicism and corruption and violence; welcoming the despised and unclean, bringing the grace of God to "tax-collectors and sinners," being ready to be criticized for "breaking the traditions" when people need help; caring about needy people whether they are hungry, diseased, sinful or possessed.

Being ready to confront those who use power for self-advancement, the proud and the violent, leaders driven by blindness and hubris; being ready to oppose people who used God's name and word to cloak their own agendas; being ready to call sin, sin; and goodness, goodness. Being ready to teach those eager to learn, ready to bring wisdom into situations of conflict, ready to expend time and energy, and to experience exhaustion from doing so. Ready to spend time alone in prayer, in fasting, resisting temptation, constant re-dedicating himself to the will of the Father.

"As the Father sent me, I am sending you." Go to all the world, to all the lost and imprisoned and hungry people, to all the people in slavery, in exile, living in the wilderness; and bring them my message of redemption and forgiveness, and do it in the way I have shown you.

2) *The Presence and Power of the Spirit*

But how can any ordinary person do such things, carry out such a mission? Where will the strength, the wisdom, the compassion, the endurance, come from? The same place Jesus found these things – in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

"Receive the Holy Spirit," says Jesus to his disciples. How can *he* give them the Spirit? Because the Spirit has been given to him "without measure." When he was baptized, the dove descended on him as a symbol of

the coming of the Spirit: he was the one, said John the Baptist, "on whom the Spirit came and remained." OT prophets, priests and kings had known the Spirit descend on them in power for their term of service; but on Jesus, the Spirit "remained." He could therefore, said John the Baptist, "baptize with the Holy Spirit." Jesus had the Spirit, and could give it to those who believed in him.

So Jesus had said the Spirit could make people "born again," "born from above," "born of God." The Spirit would bring new life to those who believed. The Spirit would, when Jesus had been "glorified" in his Crucifixion – Resurrection – Ascension, become a source of thirst-quenching and life-giving water to those who believed; the Spirit would become a "river of living water springing up within" people who believed. And when the time came for Jesus to return to the Father and send out his disciples on their mission, the Spirit would come on them in power and remain, so that they would know the truth about Jesus, be empowered to witness to him, and be able to bring both conviction of sin and forgiveness of sins to the world they were sent to.

The Spirit would be the presence and power of Jesus and of the Father in and among the disciples when Jesus was no longer with them. The Spirit would be their guide, their teacher, their protector, their counselor – "another Counselor," just as Jesus was. He would be an advocate in their defense, and a prosecutor of their case against sin and evil in the world.

All these promises, Jesus conveyed in a simple command: "Receive the Holy Spirit," and a deeply symbolic act: "Jesus breathed..." on them. This is the word that is used in Genesis 2:7 when God the Creator "breathes into the nostrils" of the man he has made from clay, and the man becomes a living being. The "breath of God" is the breath of life, and Jesus breathes into his disciples a new creation, a new life. It is almost a "resurrection" – indeed it is *the metaphorical use of "resurrection" to describe*

the new way of life that disciples of Jesus are to demonstrate now in this world (N.T. Wright).

So the ancient Hebrew and Greek ambiguity of language that makes one word stand for *wind, breath and spirit*, is in play as the risen Jesus “breathes” the Holy Spirit into and among his disciples. We shall see it again at Pentecost - to which this event is, you could say, preparatory – when “the sound of a rushing mighty wind fills the house” and the Holy Spirit comes in power, is poured out, to remain, on all the 120 or more disciples of Jesus who are gathered in Jerusalem, waiting as Jesus had told them.

The Church will need the power of the Spirit to carry out Jesus’ commission to “go into all the world,” just as the Father sent Jesus to Israel in the power of the Spirit.

3) *The Forgiveness of Sins*

As the church is sent in the power of the Spirit, she must bring Jesus’ message of redemption and the forgiveness of sins. “If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven,” says Jesus. Those words have, of course, caused some confusion. First, it should be clear that “they are forgiven” is standard (passive-voice) biblical language for “God forgives them.”

But did Jesus mean that the Church would have the authority to *define what was sin*, and to pronounce it forgiven or not, and that God would then ratify their decision by actually forgiving? If so, who was in charge? Is it possible that God would fall in with his imperfect Church’s definitions of sin and forgiveness? Or, was Jesus giving *special power to the Apostles only* - and their duly ordained successors - to pronounce on sin? Some have thought so, and traditions grew up that a duly ordained priest could hear confession of sin and then pronounce *te absolvo*, “I absolve you” from your sins.

The Protestant Reformation emphasized a different interpretation; that all the minister

may do is to *proclaim that Christ forgives* those who are penitent: as Cranmer’s *Book of Common Prayer* puts it, “He pardoneth and absolveth all them that truly repent, and unfeignedly believe his holy Gospel.” This is a better interpretation of Jesus’ words: that the church, in the power of the Spirit, proclaims the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. *He has accomplished* it in his Crucifixion and Resurrection; his church is now to proclaim it.

4) *Our Mission, Our Power, Our Message*

So how are we, the Church of Jesus Christ in the USA in the 21st C., carrying out our mission? Are we carrying the truth that “Jesus redeems” to people who are trapped in sin, in despair, lost in the desert, thirsty for truth and meaning? Are we even exerting ourselves to get that message to the next generation, to our children and grandchildren? Do we *believe* that “Jesus saves,” and are we willing to expend any effort to get that word out? Or will we sit in front of our TVs and wring our hands over the hedonism, the misogyny, the promiscuity, the indifference, the violence of “young people today”? If we believe that the Gospel of Jesus Christ makes a difference in people’s lives, why is nobody signing up to help in Sunday School?

There are people in our church today who think that we should start a prison ministry. Would you be willing to help? Or do you think that “locking them up and throwing away the key” is the only way to teach “those people,” because they will never change? There are people here who are trying hard to mend the deep divisions on this community over taxes and school budgets. Are you willing to help, or do you think the current polarization is good for our community?

And when Christians do go out to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed in the home, the community and the workplace, what power do we use? Are we happy only to join mass protests, or ones that have the backing of the rich and powerful?

Do we think that getting powerful people on the side of the Gospel will make it heard? Do we think that invisible service to insignificant people is a waste of our time, talent and effort? Or is the hidden, invisible, secret power of the Holy Spirit within and among Christians enough to motivate us, strengthen us, guide us, protect us in mission to a messed-up world?

And what is our message concerning sin, evil, forgiveness? Are we sure enough of the grace of God to tell people that if they come in repentance to Jesus Christ, there is no sin too bad to be forgiven? Or are we not too sure about that? On the other side, are there sins that should be declared “unforgiven” – though not unforgivable? – that is, does the church have the courage to say that some things *really are* wrong, sinful, and should be repented of?

We are sent into the world as Jesus was, and we need again to “receive the Holy Spirit.” Let us pray that Jesus will “breathe” new life into you and me.

Let us pray...