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THE SPIRIT BREATHES ON US



Jerusalem was all abuzz. The authorities had hoped that getting rid of Jesus would bring a resolution to the tension surrounding him, but it only made things worse. Well, it wasn't really the execution that was causing the problem; it was that pesky rumor of his resurrection from the dead that was the real issue.

The crowds had gathered in Jerusalem and people could feel that something was building, something was about to happen.

St. Luke, who tradition teaches was an artist, paints the scene for us in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles.

The scene he paints is, of course, Pentecost.

But perhaps it's best to first take a quick step back to see how we got there. In the first chapter of Acts, Jesus appeared to the apostles after his crucifixion and resurrection. He asked them not to leave Jerusalem. Obviously, things are about to get interesting. Rather than leaving, they are instructed to "wait for the promise of the Father—about which you have heard me speak; for John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:5–6).

I am fairly confident that they had no idea what Jesus was talking about. They probably didn't remember the parable where Jesus said, "What father among you would hand his son a snake when he asks for a fish? Or hand him a scorpion when he asks for an egg? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father in heaven give the holy Spirit to those who ask him?" (Lk 11:11–13).

Sure, the first part makes sense. I mean, really, what kind of father would give his son a snake for a fish? But the whole meaning of the "Father in heaven and Holy Spirit" just might have escaped the disciples' understanding.

However, Jesus had mentioned something like that on another occasion. At the end of Luke, he once again makes a similar statement: "And behold I am sending the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high" (Lk 24:49). Maybe they were beginning to understand, maybe not.

At any rate, Jesus mentions on multiple occasions the promise of the Father. What exactly is the promise of the Father and how will the disciples come to understand?

"Go to Jerusalem and wait," Jesus tells the apostles. It's not hard to imagine a few of the apostles wondering how long they will have to wait, and for what were they waiting.

I wonder what they noticed first. Was it the wind? A noise?

Suddenly, from the sky, from no particular place and from everywhere, there came a strong, driving wind. This evokes familiar scenes of a beach house being battered by hurricane-force winds. One can imagine the noise of the wind rushing through cracks in doors. It must have been chaotic.

"What's going on?"

"What's happening?"

Tongues of fire appear to them, eventually parting and resting on each of them. What must this have looked like? A hovering, massive ball of fire inches above their head?

Really? As if the driving wind wasn't enough a little fire is thrown in for good measure.

The fire appears overhead and then begins to divide, finally resting on each of them. The fire consumes them. The fire, the wind, and the promise of the Father overwhelms them.

Each of the apostles is filled with the Holy Spirit and *all* present were astounded and amazed. Of course they were astounded and amazed; this event would change the history of humanity. It was a spectacular event. The love of the Father and the Son which animated Jesus' life on earth was being poured into the hearts of God's people. God's spirit, his very self, was being shared with his creation, us. This was a startling display of God's power and sovereignty. The Pentecost event in the Acts of the Apostles once again reveals that God chooses to show himself with great power that can astound and amaze crowds.

Sometimes.

BREATH OF GOD

Sometimes God reveals himself and it amazes the crowds. Sometimes it is not as dramatic.

I'm always intrigued when I think and pray about the event of the Acts of the Apostles with the reception of the Holy Spirit found in John's gospel (Jn 20:22). Both events are recounted in the readings at the Liturgy on the Feast of Pentecost.

The account in Luke of the apostles receiving the Holy Spirit is certainly more familiar. The thunder, shaking room, and tongues of fire all make for great stories and homilies. However, I find John's account of the apostles receiving the Holy Spirit equally, if not more, compelling. While the effect is the same—the disciples

are empowered—the means by which this happens is remarkably different.

Once again the apostles were all together in one place, in a locked room because they were afraid, terrified perhaps. Let's not lose sight of the paralyzing nature of their fear. Jesus had recently been executed. The one they loved had left the very room they were gathered in and was led to his death—a horrific, public execution. The disciples were very aware of what the mob was capable of doing and did not want to fall under their vengeful wrath. They were hiding because they were afraid that they might be next. There was no indication that the killing was going to stop with Jesus; they didn't know what the religious leaders or Romans were thinking, so they hid. I have never experienced this sort of fear. I was afraid I would get grounded for a bad grade or I feared I would get a ticket for speeding, but I have never feared for my life.

Can you imagine being in a small room, filled with terror that the authorities may find you and, if they did, you could be condemned to die?

I would guess the disciples were being extremely quiet. Every creak caused their hearts to skip a beat.

“Did you hear that?”

“Who is it?”

“Is someone there?”

The scriptures don't say exactly how Jesus appeared, they just state that he did. John simply says that Jesus came and stood in their midst.

The Lord offers them peace, reminding them (and us) that peace is the presence of someone, not merely an absence of something. Jesus' presence and his greeting provide peace in the midst of their fear. He does not cast out the fear the disciples were experiencing, but he rather offers peace. His peace changes them.

Jesus then shows the disciples the wounds in his hands and side. This was to confirm Jesus' identity, to reveal to the disciples that it was really Jesus. Without the wounds they couldn't know for sure.

"It sure looks like Jesus, but Jesus was crucified and this person has no signs of a crucifixion."

On the contrary. Jesus reveals his wounds to those present to let them know it is really him. It's important that Jesus confirms who he is by showing his wounds. It reminds us of the connection between the Cross and the Resurrection; they go together. Jesus had to suffer the agony of death before the beauty of the Resurrection. In the midst of our cross, our wounds, there is always hope. When we are overwhelmed with our difficulties and suffering we recall that this is not the final word. We remember that not even death on a cross could defeat Jesus. The wounded, crucified one is alive!

Jesus, for a second time, offers the disciples peace as if to say, "Don't let the wounds, the suffering rob you of your peace."

He then breathes on them.

Breathing on someone is such a personal gesture. We've all had someone breathe on us. When I was a little kid, breathing on my friends was a part of my morning routine. I recall in second grade each morning I would play a game with a few of the other boys in my class. We would walk up to one another and breathe in each other's face. We would then try to guess what the other had for breakfast. Syrup was always a dead giveaway. The girls would think it was so gross, but I think they were just jealous that we didn't allow them to be a part of our fun. Even as silly as it was, there was a closeness, something personal (and maybe gross) about breathing on one another.

Jesus breathes on the apostles, and that's it. He breathes on them and invites them to "receive the Holy Spirit."

That's all, no driving wind, shaking buildings, or tongues of fire. Just a simple breath, the breath of God. It's an image we see in Genesis where God "blew into the nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Gn 2:7). The breath of God, the *ruah*, in Hebrew, brings life to humanity's flesh. Humanity is not truly alive until the breath of God enters us.

I find this a beautiful image. From the dust of the earth God forms humanity and then, in a deeply personal action, God draws humanity close to himself and bringing man's face to his own, God breathes life. God himself breathes life into humanity.

The breath of God rushes throughout all scripture. Job proclaims, "For the spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life" (Jb 33:4). In the thirty-seventh chapter of Ezekiel we find a stark image of God showing the prophet Ezekiel a valley of dry bones. The Lord asks Ezekiel if the dry bones can come back to life, to which Ezekiel wisely responds that only the Lord would know such a thing. The Lord instructs Ezekiel to prophesy and breathe life into the bones. Ezekiel does as the Lord commanded and the bones "came to life." The bones rattle, shake and begin to move, much like getting out of bed in the morning, and they come to life. The Lord then reminds Ezekiel that he will put his spirit in him so that he will also come to life (see Ezekiel 37:1–14).

Jesus appeared to the apostles and offered them peace and breathes on them. Jesus breathes life *into* them, not merely on them. The breath of Jesus consumed them; it entered their very beings. The disciples received the breath of Jesus; they breathed in his breath and received his life. The breath of the Spirit changed the disciples.

EXPERIENCES OF THE HOLY SPIRIT ARE OFTEN SIMPLE

One of the reasons I love John's portrayal of the disciples receiving the Holy Spirit is because of the simplicity and subtlety of it. When the disciples receive the Holy Spirit in Acts it is such a dramatic, big scene. The driving wind (breath of God), thunder, and tongues of fire are a familiar image to many of us because we have read and heard this story since our youth. It's a wonderful story that is a key to the life of the Church. But for most people, this is a story they have *heard* but not an encounter they have *experienced*. How many people have experienced such things? Who has experienced the Holy Spirit as a strong, driving wind that shakes a building? I've heard stories of those who have had such experiences, but I think most would agree it is the exception rather than the rule. No doubt Christians long and clamor for such experiences, but the reality is that they are very, very rare.

The account from Acts is wonderful, but more often than not, it hasn't been my experience. That is not to say that I have not experienced the power of God's spirit; on the contrary, but it has rarely been in a manner recounted in the Acts of the Apostles. It is generally much simpler, more gentle and subtle, more like a breath than a strong, driving wind. In that sense it is similar to Elijah's experience; he did not encounter God in the earthquake or the fire but in the gentle breeze (breath of God) (see 1 Kings 19:12).

So often we are a people who both love and have grown to expect spectacles, the bigger the better. Lights, fire, noise—anything that captures our attention and lures us in. I recall attending an indoor soccer game when I was in college. I had been invited to attend by my older brother and I reluctantly accepted. At the time I was not much of a soccer fan; I thought the games were slow and kind of boring. However, I was struck by the orchestrated

show before the game commenced. There were explosions, fireworks, smoke, and noise before the match started and it was all extremely engaging. The spectacle was necessary in order to engage the crowd.

In Acts, St. Luke writes that the *crowd* was amazed and astounded by the driving wind and the tongues of fire. Maybe crowds need such things in order to be amazed? Is a breath going to astound a crowd? With St. John there is no driving wind, nor is there a crowd. Rather, only Jesus, peace, wounds, and a breath. Could it be that only disciples and not crowds are able to encounter Jesus and his Spirit in wounds and the subtlety of a breath?

I'm afraid we have often behaved like the crowd expecting brilliant, hypnotizing spectacles that stimulate our senses. At times we want the same from God, and because of this we often miss his simple, transforming breath.

The challenge for us is to be able to perceive the breath of God. The only way this can happen is for us to stay close enough to God that when he breathes we are aware of it. Imagine the closeness of an infant being held to her mother's chest. When either the baby or mother breathes the other is aware. That's how close I want to be to the Lord: the Lord breathes and I am filled.

The Spirit's movement is often subtle; it's essential for us to be aware of this in order to experience the Lord's grace. If we are only looking for the earthquake we will always miss the breath. If I come to experience that the Lord's movement is often found in a breath then I am more likely to encounter the living God.

BREATHE ON ME

Oftentimes it begins with a simple prayer.

"Jesus, come with your Holy Spirit."

Pray that God would breathe life into any doubts you may have. Sometimes I pray and wonder if God even hears me. Many