

Veni Sancte Spiritus

Pentecost: June 9, 2019

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Scripture: Acts 2:1-21, 41-47 (NRSV)

Veni Sancte Spiritus. Come Holy Spirit.



When I was about six years old, I went to the park with my grandma Betty. It was summer and I was spending the day with her and her neighbor across the street, Shirley. Shirley had a grandson about my age and multiple cats, and so I loved spending time in their grand Victorian house. But today, we were headed to Rayner Park, so we could look for frogs and watch the ducks and slide on the slides. I was a bit of a shy child, especially at age six, and so I wasn't terribly adventurous. Colin, Shirley's grandson, was, and encouraged me to climb to the top of what seemed like an impossibly tall slide so we could slide down. Well, it was decided I should go first, and so I sat at the top of the slide and looked down...alllllll the way down...and right when I thought I might be ready, Colin *pushed* me. And there I went, sliding down metal hot from the sun, and landed abruptly, surprisingly, flat on my back at the end of the slide.

The wind had been knocked out of me and I couldn't breathe.

This was the first time this had happened to me, where I really could not catch my breath and I couldn't move and my body seemed to be paralyzed with panic. I couldn't breathe.

Grandma and Shirley were on the scene in no time, helping me sit up and calm my racing heart, telling me to *inhale* and *exhale* slowly and surely as Grandma rubbed my back. As Colin slid down the slide to a graceful end with his feet on the ground, Grandma commented on how the dirt at the end of the slide had been worn down and so there was a small ditch at the end...how could I have known?

But what I did know in that moment was that my body was remembering how to breathe in and out slowly, that I was no longer wracked with sobs that stole my breath, and that I was not alone.

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The Latin word *spiritus* and the Greek word *pneuma* share these meanings: spirit, wind and breath. The English words *respire* and *conspire* come from the Latin *spiritus*...to *respire* means to “breathe again” and to *conspire* means, at its root, “to breathe together with.” So in our Pentecost Scripture today, as the followers of Jesus were all gathered in one place and suddenly a great wind came inside the room, we can understand this wind to be God’s breath, the Holy Spirit. And as something like tongues of flame hovered over the heads of the people gathered and as they began to speak in multiple languages, the languages of all the peoples of the Earth, the breath of God was inhabiting them, reminding them to *respire*, to breathe again; the Holy Spirit was *conspiring* with them, breathing with them.

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Sometimes people imagine Pentecost to be an undoing, a reversal, of the Tower of Babel. Do you remember that story? Up until that point in human history, humans were content to speak one language and rely on God...but then they had an idea to build a huge tower to the sky, to reach heaven, to be close to God...or perhaps, to become gods themselves. Babel was the height of human arrogance, and so God scattered the peoples of the earth and gave them many languages so that they could not understand each other, so that they would no longer be able to band together and challenge God’s authority. And so some folks think that Pentecost is the undoing of the Babel story. Where God scattered people at Babel, God gathers together at Pentecost and the people can understand each other in their many different languages. But Pentecost is not the opposite of the Babel story: the opposite of the gifting of many languages would be giving one language, and at Pentecost, the people are given understanding of languages. At Pentecost, the miracle is that, as Larry Green reminded us last week, “they were all together in one place.” Out of diversity came not uniformity, but community.

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Now, it should be noted that however nice it is to talk about the Trinity of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, the last member of the trinity is kinda given the short end of the stick. Pentecostals and many Baptists and Anabaptists talk a lot about the Holy Spirit that enlivens their worship and bestows spiritual gifts and makes

the priesthood of all believers work. But the Holy Spirit doesn't show up all that much in the gospels, besides coming down from heaven in the form of a dove to bless Jesus' baptism. But the Holy Spirit is the main character in the Acts of the Apostles. Some of you may remember from our adult learning sessions in January that Luke and Acts were probably written by the same author in the late first century of the Common Era, some 50-60 years after Jesus' execution. There are many similarities between the books of Luke and Acts of the Apostles, as the author likes to make parallels between these two. Thus, in Luke 2 we have the birth of Jesus. And in Acts 2, we have the birth of the church. In Luke, God puts on flesh and is called "Emmanuel, God-with us." And in the story of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is poured out on all people, another sighting of Emmanuel, God with us.

Now, after Jesus died and rose again, and before he ascended to heaven, Jesus had promised to send what some Bible translations call "the Comforter," "the Advocate," the "Counselor." Jesus had promised not to leave the people of God orphaned, without any path forward. Jesus had called on the ancient prophets for God to pour out the Spirit on all flesh, on all people. And gathered in one place, people with different experiences and life stories and plans and feelings, these folks were about to receive Jesus' follow-through.

Veni Sancte Spiritus. Come Holy Spirit.

Henri Nouwen writes, "When we speak about the Holy Spirit, we speak about the breath of God, breathing in us... We are seldom aware of our breathing. It is so essential for life that we only think about it when something is wrong with it. The Spirit of God is like our breath. God's spirit is more intimate to us than we are to ourselves. We might not often be aware of it, but without it we cannot live a "spiritual life." It is the Holy Spirit of God who prays in us, who offers us the gifts of love, forgiveness, kindness, goodness, gentleness, peace, and joy. It is the Holy Spirit who offers us the life that death cannot destroy. Let us always pray: 'Come, Holy Spirit.'"¹

He's right. I don't think about my breath very often. I only really think about it as I'm hiking up a hill, or as I am surprised by something, as I strain to get into a challenging yoga pose, or as I am anxious and my lungs feel like they are in my

¹ Daily Meditation by Henri Nouwen, May 18, 2014

throat. I think about my breath when I'm at the bedside of someone transitioning from this life into whatever is next, or when I meet a brand new baby breathing air for the first time. I think about my breath when I hold someone close and notice that our inhales and exhales are synchronous. In the intimate, thin places at the edges of life and death, when our bodies are struggling to do miraculous things, that's when I think about breath.

But, really, breath is not an everyday noticing for me. And similarly, and perhaps oddly for a Baptist, the Holy Spirit is not an everyday noticing for many people. I mean, the Spirit of God doesn't always send tongues of flame and rushing winds and multilingualism to remind us of God's presence. But maybe there are other ways the Holy Spirit is drawing our attention to God, the Creative One who breathes in and with and for us, who empowers us to respire and who conspires with us.

Hildegard of Bingen, the 11th century German mystic, wrote these words that she imagined the Holy Spirit saying: "I, the highest and fiery power, have kindled every spark of life...I, the fiery life of divine essence, am aflame beyond the beauty of the meadows, I gleam in the waters, and I burn in the sun, moon, and stars. With every breeze, as with invisible life that contains everything, I awaken everything to life. The air lives by turning green and being in bloom. The waters flow as if they were alive. The sun lives in its light, and the moon is enkindled, after its disappearance, once again by the light of the sun so that the moon is again revived...and thus I remain hidden in every kind of reality as a fiery power. Everything burns because of me in the way our breath constantly moves us, like the wind-tossed flame in a fire."²

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us. There's a sweet, sweet Spirit in this place. How beautiful are our words about the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, the Breath of Godself. But do we really believe God is with us? Do we really believe that the Creator of the universe is breathing in and with and through us right here, right now? As we watch the news and scroll through Facebook and pay our rent and go to work and volunteer at church and attend seminars on privilege and go to protests and spend time with our families...in what ways are we missing how the Holy Spirit is showing up in our lives and in our world? I don't know about you, but I am tired. I am overwhelmed. I could name so

² in Lauren Winner, *Wearing God*, 205

many things, and I'm sure you could add to the list...What is there to do, on this day of Pentecost, in this world so full of pain and so overwhelming?

And what was there to do on that first Pentecost, as Jesus' followers tried to figure out what was next for them, who was going to be their leader, how would they relate to the Roman Empire that murdered their prophet, how would this fledgling movement ever survive?...what was there to do...but say, "Come, Holy Spirit."

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As on the first Pentecost, we are gathered together here, all in one place, each of us containing the breath of God that breathed into us at birth. We can practice noticing God-with-us by gathering with others who also have the breath of God in them. Noticing the edges of life in the breath of the very young and very old. Noticing the shimmering of the dew in the morning breeze as the Spirit greets the world with a Good Morning. Noticing the Spirit inhabiting our most intimate moments, loving us through the motions of each other's bodies and rises and falls of respiration in each other's chests.

And so once we notice our breath, once we recognize that God is continually creating and breathing new life into us and reanimating places in the world that are lifeless...once our attention is drawn to this, what do we do? We cannot simply know that we ourselves are given life by the breath of the Holy Spirit and stay the same...no, the people of Pentecost were literally *conspiring* with each other, breathing with each other, inhaling and exhaling the same air. They conversed with each other, committed to life together, spread the gospel news of how life continues after death and beyond. In the tradition of those people on the first Pentecost, we must ask what we are called to do in this time as we remember the Spirit among us and call forth the Spirit again. Let us *respire*, breathe-again the breath of the Creative One who *conspires* with us each and every day, the One who animates our world, the One whose Spirit is surely in this place.

Today, beloved church, I invite you to join me in saying, "Veni Sancte Spiritus. Come Holy Spirit. Fall afresh on us. Breathe the breath of life. Breathe in us. Breathe through us. Conspire with us."

Breathe with us into the places in our lives that are anxious. That are hurting. That are complacent. Breathe with Your Creation, reminding us that we share this Earth and that we are not alone. We breathe the air that the dinosaurs breathed and that the prophets breathed and that Jesus breathed and that our ancestors breathed. We breathe the air that is filtered through the complex biology of each and every green growing thing, the air that works with the fertile soil to help us grow.

Breathe with us into the chests of children with asthma and the elderly whose lungs are damaged from wildfire smoke and pollution. Breathe with us into the lungs of Appalachian coal miners and migrant farm laborers and indigenous factory workers. Breathe with us into the lungs of folks living on the streets who have nowhere to turn for clean, fresh air in the middle of a modern city. Breathe with us into the chests of farmers whose lands are being flooded, who fear they have no livelihood.

Breathe with us into the lungs of those who can breathe no more because they were killed by state violence. Breathe with us into the jails as people are forced to breathe stale air. Breathe with us for those like Eric Garner who cried, "I can't breathe" 11 times before his respiration was taken from him. Breathe with us for those like Trayvon Martin and Tamir Rice and so many more, even here in Seattle, who should have taken many many more breaths but whose lives were cut short. Breathe with us for the trans women of color and with the indigenous women who are missing and murdered, and for all those who fight for justice for their loved ones. Breathe with us into the stuffed detention centers full of immigrant families and children, who feel breathless desperation to escape the violence and poverty and degradation of the places they used to call home.

Breathe with us into the lungs of women lying with their feet in stirrups in the doctor's offices, awash with a multitude of emotions. Breathe with us into the lungs of people whose bodies feel like they are not their own. Breathe with us in the lives of people with cancer, people in the hospital, people who are aching for accessible and affordable medical treatment. Breathe with us in the bellies of tiny babies, born too early or on time, born healthy or sick, born at all into this world which cannot promise to sustain them. Breathe in the lungs of people in labor, particularly black and brown women and trans* people, who labor and labor and

labor to bring another human life into this world, who struggle as Romans says the earth does, with pangs of travail, as the world seeks to birth a new life onto a dying planet.

Breathe with us into a world that was Created so that all life would flourish but that is now imbalanced so that the poor are getting poorer and the rich are getting richer and the middle is disappearing. Breathe with us into the lives of our graduating seniors, that they may be filled with your Spirit as they become more of who they truly are and bless the world with their passion. Breathe with us into the streets and halls of power, that we might recognize your Holy Spirit *conspiring* for justice for those pushed to the edges of society and so that we might join this *conspiracy*.

Breathe on us, Breath of God. We know your sweet Spirit is in this place, because *we* are in this place and *You* are breathing in *us*. Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us.

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