

From creating order out of chaos, calling and caring for God's people in the wilderness, and directing the prophets, to calling disciples, sending the Holy Spirit upon the early church, healing, and equipping the church to tell of God's glory, God has been throughout history abundantly alive and active. Guess what? God is still abundantly alive and active. To quote a Newsboys song, "God is not dead." God is still doing wondrous things. God is still creating, calling, caring, directing, sending, healing, and equipping. God is still making possible what many through the ages have thought to be impossible. God is still making able what many have thought to be unable. God is still saying can when so many want to settle for can't. Recalling God's wondrous deeds is the journey we are going to embark on this Summer together. And I can't think of a more fitting starting line than Pentecost. I mean, who doesn't love a little wind and fire to get your attention.

Let's begin with wind. In Hebrew, *ruach* means wind, breath, Spirit. Hebrew often groups words together with similar nature. Wind, breath, and Spirit all have great power with great effect, but cannot be seen in nature themselves. Therefore, what we are to understand of *ruach* is that its presence connects stories of creation in which the Spirit moved over the watery chaos as wind with stories of Pentecost in which the Spirit rushes upon the whole house like a violent wind. This wind, Spirit, is understood as the breath of God breathing upon creation, and inside creation (like when God breathed life into humanity), and throughout the whole Church. With God's Spirit, wind, and breath, all are filled and become able to speak and do things once believed unable. Different talents and skills and dialects and tones, but "it is the same Spirit who gives them."

In the Acts text recalling Pentecost, we read that Peter preaches the words of the Prophet Joel telling us that "I, God, will pour out from my Spirit upon all men... I, God, will send wonders in the heaven above and signs upon the earth below." And in John 20, it is recalled that after promising peace to be with the disciples, Jesus breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Imagine yourself in those chairs. Imagine the sheer silence suddenly interrupted. Allow yourself to hear the rattling sound fill the house, bellowing as if from the heart of creation, like a bass drum from the divine throne. Feel the wind whip about the room and the breath of God flow over you and around you. And if that doesn't get your attention, turn your eye to the tongues of fire.

Fire. There is the literal fire that burns things up and provides a source for heat and cooking. There is the holy fire that burns with conviction and invitation but does not consume, like the burning bush appearing to Moses. There is the fire we feel in our bellies or our hearts or our minds or our souls, a fire that heats us up and catapults us into action. At Pentecost, we recognize this last one, because *“When the Spirit shows up, God’s gonna set you on fire!”*

(Leigh Stuckey, JP XLV 4, 43)

On fire for what, you might ask? More like on fire for who? On fire for God!!!

The early Church had a tremendous sense that Jesus was the hinge of all history; that with His coming, eternity had invaded time and God had entered the human arena; and that, therefore, life and the world could never be the same again. With the coming of Jesus something crucial, unrepeatable, all-affecting had emerged. To them, Jesus was not just a historical figure they read about or a story they listened to. Jesus was someone whom they knew and met and experienced. He was not a figure in a book, one who had lived and died; He was a living presence, alive for evermore. (Barclay, 18) Knowing Jesus in this way is like being consumed by a fire and having your life set ablaze with the glory of God.

Being “on fire for God” was a phrase we used to describe youth after a week at Massanetta, Montreat, or a Mission trip. I suspect it still is. The experience of these events is like a modern-day Pentecost. The Spirit of God is so present in the atmosphere of music, worship, new friends, issues wrestled with, re-creation, and multiple cultures merging together as one, it becomes nirvana. Youth love it and come to long for it. At the end of each trip, I would try to remind students that we must return home, but that we are not to return home the same. We are to use the breath and fire of God we have encountered and share it with others: embody it for others to see and want more of.

What normally happens when winds, especially strong winds, and fire are witnessed and experienced? Destruction, right? High winds come and we begin to wonder whether the roof is nailed down well enough, or the shingles will hold on, or that canopy of trees surrounding our home will stay upright. And if we think of wind in the context of breath, we might think of the breaths we breathe each day, but likely we lean toward when we have been out of breath or maybe even times in which speech, as a product of breath, has been used against us. And fire? Fire leaves a mark no matter how big or small. Fire has destroyed massive buildings, entire cities, and made important evidence vanish. Not always, but often I think, we think of wind, breath, or fire and picture destruction as the aftermath.

However, what is the aftermath of wind, breath, and fire as we encounter it in relationship with God? In scripture, both wind and fire are associated with theophanies or visible manifestations to humankind of God. You see, with God, wind and fire are symbols of construction rather than destruction, order not chaos, life not death. There is still an aftermath of each that leaves a mark, but the marks we receive from God and God's work with us are constructive.

What happened in the Church at Pentecost is a story of breath, fire, and the aftermath. The breath of God came, and the fire of God descended, and the Church, the people of God, were never to be the same again. The aftermath of what took place at Pentecost is a witness of God's power at work in the world, enveloping all along the path of construction. As Leigh Stuckey writes, *"not just the good congregation, but the folks gathered in the Harris Teeter Tavern or down at the Pita House. Not just "us," but them too, our neighbors waiting for day labor, the unhoused folks we see walking up and down Main St. or Church St. or Clay St., hardworking businessmen and women, the LGBTQ student, the rich doctor, and all others we encounter reminding us that their lives matter too. And then perhaps, bound by a common flame, we who so cherish our tidiness could finally break out of our upper rooms and embrace God's kingdom and our siblings."*

*"The scene may look a little wonky, but that's the Spirit- the one who makes possible all impossibilities, who hovered over the chaotic void at creation, who called young Mary to embrace the eternal God in her womb, who descended at Jesus' baptism, who bonded the crucified Son with the suffering Father. That same Spirit at Pentecost created a people and brought forth a community where before there was division."*

(Leigh Stuckey, JP XLV 4, 43)

Historical notes reveal that never was there a more international crowd in Jerusalem than at the time of Pentecost. By the time of Pentecost each year, which was a festival occurring 50 days following Passover (Easter), the travel conditions were at their best, which means as many and probably more came to Pentecost as were at Passover. Hints the listing of so many different peoples present in the Church.

God chose to send breath and fire upon the Church at that time so that the Church would know of God's intentions and will. Pentecost illustrates the desires of God for all of God's people to talk to one another and be in relationship with one another. God sent the Spirit as a bridge to bring people together. The Spirit did not erase the differences between the folks in Jerusalem (God celebrates our differences and uniqueness); the Spirit did not create one supreme culture or language or race or gender (God is the one who reigns supreme), or one way of being properly "Christian" (For to be Christian is to follow Christ, not

denominational doctrine). In the movement of the Spirit at Pentecost, the very thing that previously prohibited community- the inability of one person to speak to another- was overcome.

Today in 2022, celebrating Pentecost, breath, fire, and the aftermath, means we are to joyfully embrace the wide world and all its voices- always with an eye toward a singular miracle that we, each of us, are together children of the Creator, given life by the Spirit, brought reconciliation by the Son. Salvation is never just mine or yours. It is always ours.

I encountered a thought this week that I think challenges and invites us into what God, the Spirit, and Christ embody: *"We can be made one. But only when we get over our tidy pretensions, our suspicions and mistrust. Only when we open ourselves to the faithful growing pains of a life of discipleship. Only when we leave our hallowed halls to embrace the voices we might otherwise never have heard."*

Can you feel the rushing wind and breath of God around you? Is the fire of God nipping at your heels compelling you to open up, reach out, step out, and engage our loud, discordant world? If so, good! At Pentecost the Spirit rests on us in order that we might be made a little restless.

We might think this impossible. We might think we don't have what it takes. We might think we can't. With the breath and fire of God, it may be a challenge, but it is not an impossibility. With the breath and fire of God, we are able. With the breath and fire of God, we can.

Let all God's people say, Amen.