

## **The Breath of Life**

**A Sermon on Acts 2:1-21 by Rich Holmes**

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In the summer of 1998, I had just finished my first year of Seminary, and I was spending the summer working in a pastoral internship at a small church in Tennessee. Now, I shouldn't say it was in Tennessee because that isn't how people in Tennessee talk. They say "East Tennessee", "Middle Tennessee" and "West Tennessee" as if they are three separate states. I was in East Tennessee.

During this summer, the pastor of this small church was a man named Bob Reno, and during the time that I was there Bob was moderating the Session for another church that was without a pastor and even smaller. It was so small, in fact, that the Session was literally half the church. I would seriously doubt this church is still around today—and I have my doubts not because it was such a small church but because of the way that Session decided to run things. They had a handsome building with a freshly painted exterior and a majestic bell tower, but for some reason I never fully understood there was no sign out front. The Session had several meetings during that summer about getting a new church sign, something I don't know if they ever got around to, but before they got around to the business of getting a sign telling people who they were, they decided it was more urgent to get a "No Trespassing" sign, because there were some teenagers who were hanging out in their parking lot after school, and believe it or not these teenagers were doing things that these older church people found distasteful like wearing nose rings, smoking cigarettes and even using profanity.

So guess what? The end result of all that was that for the rest of the summer while I was in East Tennessee, this handsome church with about twenty members had no sign, no sign in front

of it telling the world who it was, and what it believed and whether or not they were welcome to visit, but they indeed had a sign saying “no trespassing.”

Now, you may tell me that this church had a bad plan for trying to get visitors into their building on Sunday morning, and you would be right, as I have said, I seriously doubt this church still exists today. But even if I am wrong and this church not only survived but miraculously grew and flourished, I think it is when congregations act like this that we need the story of Pentecost. Pentecost is what we traditionally call the birthday of the church, and sometimes when people want to know a little bit about who they are they go back to the story of how they came into this world. So how did we, the church come into this world?

Well, to begin our story today, you may not know that before it was the birthday of the church, Pentecost was a Jewish festival. It was a festival where people came to Jerusalem from all over the world. And during this festival, Jesus’ apostles were all gathered together in Jerusalem. Well, suddenly as they were all in one house, the story goes, there was a violent rush of wind that blew among them and tongues of fire appeared on each of them. They began speaking in languages that all those gathered in Jerusalem for the festival from all over the world could understand as their own language. It was a miracle of speaking and it was a miracle of hearing—and among those who heard, some of them marveled we are told, and they said “Aren’t these people, these apostles from Galilee? So how is it that we hear all our own languages being spoken?” But, we are told, others sneered and said “They are filled with new wine.”

Well, then Peter addressed the crowd and said “No, my friends, these apostles are not filled with new wine as you think. After all, it is only nine o’ clock in the morning. What is

happening in fact is a fulfillment of prophecy.” And then Peter whipped out his bible to the book of the prophet Joel, and he read these words: “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams. Even on my slaves both men and women in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be darkened and the moon turned to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. Then, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

What do we have in this story? We have a story that you don’t even have to read to be familiar with, because if you are a Christian and a part of the church, you have probably lived it. God does some amazing work in your life or the life of someone you know. Maybe God healed someone you know who was sick. Maybe God gave you insight at a surprising moment. Maybe you were walking through some glorious ancient cathedral some time, or you were spending a rather ordinary day in church or a rather ordinary day at home, and you felt God’s presence in a way that was simply undeniable, that was as real as anything you’d ever experienced before. God does something miraculous and there are some who believe and some who do not. There are some who believe and marvel and there are others who dismiss it and explain it away like those who say “They are filled with new wine.”

And what do you do with these skeptics, these new wine cynics? Well, one thing you can do is to just ignore them, pretend they don’t exist. In some societies, they even try to make it the case that such people do not exist at all. But notice that is not what we have in this story. Instead we have Peter saying “Ladies and gentlemen, these folks are not filled with new wine as

you think because it is only nine in the morning,” and then he goes on to tell about how this is a fulfillment of prophesy—and we hear this story told on the birthday of the church, because that is what the church does. It does not ignore the world outside its doors, it does not wish it away or turn a deaf ear to it. It always, always, always has something to say to the world, it always has a conversation to carry on with the world. No matter where you may find the church, it always has a dialogue to carry on with the world even when it finds itself in a place where it only has 20 members, even when it is barely holding on, even then, it still has a dialogue to carry on with the world. The world can choose to ignore the church, but the church cannot choose to ignore the world and still remain the church.

That doesn't mean, of course that the church always says “yes” to the world. It doesn't mean it always stands in agreement with the world and probably more often than not it says “no” to the world. And that is what we find in this story. Peter, speaking on behalf of the apostles, tells those who are gathered in Jerusalem that their skeptical explanation of what is happening with the apostles is wrong. They are not drunk, he tells them, and then in quoting the words of the prophet Joel, he gives them the correct explanation. We in the church do not have to embrace the values of this world but we have to have a conversation with this world if we are to remain the church. At least, that is, if we are to believe that this story about the church tells us something about who we are.

Actually, though, we don't even need to get this far into the story to know who we are as the church, if we indeed believe that this story tells us something about who we are. For this story is about the wind or breath of the Holy Spirit that blows among the apostles, and in the very nature of wind or breath there is shared community, there is shared dialogue, because

together all of us are breathing the only air that ever was. We cannot breathe our own private air and cut ourselves off from the rest of the world any more than we can have our own private church and cut ourselves off from the rest of the world.

I don't often quote other preachers at length in my sermons, but I can't help but quote Barbara Brown Taylor here, because she makes the point so much better than I ever could. In one of her sermons on this Pentecost story, she says "No cosmic planet-cleaning company comes along every hundred years or so to suck out all the old air and pump in some new. The same ancient air just keeps recirculating, which means that every time any one of us breathes we breathe star dust left over from the creation of the earth. We breathe brontosaurus breath and pterodactyl breath. We breathe air that has circulated through the rain forests of Kenya and air that has turned yellow with sulfur over Mexico City. We breathe the same air that Plato breathed, and Mozart and Michelangelo, not to mention Hitler and Lizzie Borden."

Today as we celebrate Pentecost, at Northminster we are also having a day to honor our graduates who have graduated from high school and who are going on to college. Most of us who are in this church are much older than these graduates and I don't know about you, but when I look at these graduates, I can't help but think back to the time when I was their age and graduating from high school, and I can't help but wonder what the church will be like that they will inherit when people my age have been lowered into the ground. Some of you might say I can't help but wonder either, but the church better never change. I can sympathize with that view. There are some things about the church that I hope never change, like our faith in a loving God, the basic beliefs that we proclaim in our confessions and creeds, and our commitment to faithful stewardship and discipleship. But if we take seriously the story of our birth, then the

church will have to change in their lifetime because the world will change, and what the church has to say to the world of today will not be the same thing the church says to the world of 30, 40 and 50 years from now.

We have a lot to focus on in the church, you and I. We have weddings, we have funerals, we have baptisms, we have staff meetings, we have session meetings, we have annual meetings, we have fundraisers and youth overnights, we have choir practices, we have stewardship campaigns and mission events, we have a building to clean and maintain. We have social events. We have a lot going on. And amid all these things that go on all the time, we can forget who we are. We can forget what we are about. So on this day, let us take a day to remember our story as the people of Pentecost. As the church, let us take a day to remember the story of our birth. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.