

The Breath of God

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". I was in East Tennessee.

During this summer, the pastor of this small church was a man named Bob 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 really all that was left. 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 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 during the boring summer months when they had nothing to do, 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 ten 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, You would be right, as I have said, I seriously doubt this church still exists. But you know what, who cares, because those teenagers made them uncomfortable. Now, maybe the teenagers needed church, you tell me maybe they needed to hear the gospel and to be shown love, but what adult feels comfortable passing by a group of smoking cussing and nose-ring wearing teenagers in the parking lot when they’re trying to go to worship with people who are just like them? Now, we know we’re a church, and we’ll get around to telling people they’re welcome to come here, but in the meantime, we want these teenagers to know they’re not to trespass on our grounds.

We often think of Pentecost as the birthday of the church, but 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 one time, Jesus’ apostles were all gathered together in one place. Well, suddenly as they were all together, 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 making a speech and having a dialogue with these skeptics. 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, 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, even when it can barely keep its doors open, even when it is barely holding on, even when it can barely speak above a whisper, 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 birth of 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 ad 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."

Now, I don't know about you, but I don't like to think about that. I don't mind thinking about breathing the same air as people I love. Well, I know I'm supposed to love everybody, so let me put it this way. I don't mind breathing the same air as people I am comfortable saying that I love. But I don't really like the idea of breathing the same air as Hitler and Lizzie Borden, and people in the Ku Klux Klan, flag burners, and drug dealers. If there's ever been a realization that's suddenly made me want to hold my breath until I pass out it's that. But if there's ever been something that has convinced me that God has a sense of humor, it's this, it's the fact that we all have the same air to breathe together.

One time I saw a picture on the internet of a mother of two small boys who I think we're about six or seven who had something that the mother called the sharing shirt that she would

make them wear. You see whenever the two boys were fighting with each other and shouting vicious things at each other she would make them wear the same shirt together. Because what do you do when you are fighting with somebody? Well, naturally you go to your room and slam the door and say I don't want to see that person or think about that person or be in the same space with that person, so what could be more miserable than bumping right up against the person you're angry with like a conjoined twin. So if you want to stop being miserable you'd better forgive that person, hadn't you. Now, you got to give it to that mother, that's pretty funny.

And isn't it pretty funny that God would do the same thing with us? By giving us all the same air to breathe it is as if God's saying you better learn to love each other and get along with each other because you bigots in the Ku Klux Klan, you're breathing the same air as all the people you hate. You Christians, you're breathing the same air as the atheists. You Democrats, you're breathing the same air as the Republicans. You Republicans you're breathing the same air as the Democrats supporters. It is as if God put the get along shirt on all of us and said you better learn to love each other or I'm going to make you as miserable as possible.

No, we don't have to have the same values as all those people we disagree with so strongly. In fact, many times, we'd better not have the same values. We'd better not believe in the same things. But what gave us birth in the church is this wind on Pentecost. This wind, this air, this breath. Trump breath, Biden breath, atheist breath, Klan breath, Black Lives Matter breath, the breath of that darn first cousin you slammed the phone on ten years ago whom you haven't spoken to since. You might say, well, preacher I don't take this Pentecost story literally.

I don't care if you take it literally. It's the only story of our birth that we got. We don't have another.

That's who we are in the church. We can no more thumb our nose at the world around us and call ourselves the church, than we can be the church and deny the story of our birth. Oh sure, we can hold our breath if we want to, we can be like that church in East Tennessee and hold our breath if we want, but good luck surviving for long if you hold your breath. If you want to live, you gotta breathe.