

Sermon – John 20:19-23; Acts 2:1-21
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
Pentecost – Year A
31 May 2020

“God-Breathed Living”

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

1. The good news of Jesus Christ is exactly that and nothing but. It is *good* news. The only bad news is how much we need it. The forgiveness of sins and the ministry of reconciliation are gifts beyond measure. The only problem is just how big the problem is. This final week of Easter has been a stark reminder of just how badly we need Easter. We see the powers and principalities at work among us; we see sin and death at work in our world. So much is that should not be. George Floyd should not be dead. Police officers should not kneel on the necks of Black men. Righteous protests should not give way to theft and destruction. The voices of the marginalized and downtrodden should have been listened to long before now. Holy anger should not be coopted by extremists stoking violence for their own purposes. Racism should not exist. People should not judge one another because of skin color. Systems of injustice and oppression that have been built up since the beginning of time should never have come to pass. And we should not have such a difficult time undoing it all. But here we are. What a week it has been. George Floyd should still be breathing. The only problem with the gospel is just how much we need it.
2. If the problem was big enough that God needed to become a human being and die to the powers of sin and the principalities of violence to save us, the problem must be pretty big. Our cities are burning. Where do we go from here? We are a people in need of Pentecost. We need the Holy Spirit, which

connects us intimately to the crucified and risen Lord Jesus and sends us unabashedly into the world for the sake of each and every person we encounter. We need God's Spirit to set us free from fear. Jesus' friends knew this fear first-hand on that Good Friday and the Saturday that followed. They had seen their teacher lynched on Calvary. Peter's denial spoke volumes; no doubt they thought the centurions would come for them, too. On that Sunday morning, however, the women go to the tomb and hear the most amazing, most ridiculous news. This Jesus whom you saw bleed out and die, this Jesus is alive. And when he shows up that night, Jesus walks right through the locked door of their fear and speaks to them: *Peace*. He breathes on them, an act of strange intimacy, gifting them with the promised presence of the Holy Spirit. With the Spirit comes a call: Go, forgive, and work for reconciliation in this world of violence and pain. *No*, Jesus as much as declares; no, I will not seek vengeance on those who have wronged me. I will unleash peace in this world. You've already killed me; what else can you do? I will work peace, Jesus proclaims, and you will do the same in my name. Peace that undoes injustice; that rights wrongs; that raises the dead.

3. What begins as an intimate, upper room, shared-breath moment becomes, fifty days later, a universal commission. Just as it was no coincidence that Jesus' death occurred at Passover, the Lamb slain for the freedom of his people, so is there a connection to the Spirit coming at Pentecost. Pentecost was a Jewish festival long before the Pentecost we celebrate. The Jewish people mark it as the fiftieth day since the Exodus from Egypt; it is the day God gave them the Torah. A friend of mine who is a rabbi shared the following this week, which I relate with his permission: "Only the Jewish People were given the Torah. God and Israel were alone at Sinai, the Rabbis teach, like a bride and groom at their wedding. In order to achieve this absolutely particular, parochial, and private experience God gave the Torah to us in the desert. We were all alone with God. No one was there. No one else was given the Torah." The rabbi continues, "And then imagine the shock. No

sooner (are) we at Sinai, all alone with the One God ... (and what) are amongst the very first words that Israel, in absolute intimacy with the One God, hears read? 'Let us make humankind in our image.'" "In ... an experience shared with no one, God declared to Israel, every person is created in the image of the One God. In this pristine moment of intimacy God declares the absolute universal principle. Every human is created in the Image." If I could sum up my friend's point, it is this: The people of God are special, chosen, precisely in the fact that they are the people who realize that God is the God of everyone. Friends, we are not called and claimed by Christ for ourselves, but for the sake of the world.

4. In the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, this theme is recapitulated in light of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the Upper Room, Jesus gifted his closest friends with the breath of the Spirit and the power to forgive. But it was never just for them. Fifty days later, the Spirit rushes violently upon them, and they are set ablaze. To do what? To preach the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ in this bad news world. The gift that seemed to be just for them turns out to be for everyone who would call upon the name of the Lord. All the people present, the Medes and the Cappadocians and even the pesky Parthians, they all hear in their own language. God doesn't demand that they first assimilate or capitulate. The Spirit speaks to them in words they know. As the prophet Joel had foretold, the Spirit falls upon all flesh. Upon all people. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, making the intimate universal, connecting the one-time crucifixion of the one person, Jesus Christ, to all people in all times and places. Why? To speak peace. To create reconciliation. To dream the audacious dream of God in which young and old, Jew and Greek, slave and free, Black, brown, and white, would all be saved, set free for life in God's Kingdom that transcends and eclipses this old world of death.

5. The Spirit, as Luther reminds us, call, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth. Called, we go to preach the gospel. Gathered, we stand together with oppressed peoples of all times and places, for they, too, are created in the image of God. Enlightened, we seek to shine the light of Christ into this benighted world. Sanctified, we are set apart to live for the sake of our neighbors. We begin by recognizing our own need for the forgiveness offered by Christ, our own participation in, and benefit from, the structural injustices of this world. In the well-known words of Soviet dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, “The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart.”

6. But just as we have sin and evil within our own hearts, so does the crucified Christ speak peace and forgiveness to us. Just as we participate in injustice, so does Christ set us free to work for reconciliation. Just as we were dead, so are we now raised to newness of life and set on fire for the work of the gospel. The powers and principalities of this world, the old trio of sin, death, and the devil, would seek to choke the breath of life from us. And truly, there are those who cannot breathe. But Christ who was dead has been raised. The Holy Spirit has been poured out. We are each intimately connected to God in Christ through the Spirit, and we are each sent to proclaim the gospel to everyone, to work for the well-being of everyone, because everyone is made in the image of God. This is a broken world but make no mistake: The risen Christ is on the loose. The Spirit fills all in all. God’s not done with us yet. Christ is risen. In Christ, rise up for the sake of the gospel and the good of your neighbor. Christ is risen, and in him George Floyd will rise, too. And one day so will I; one day so will you. May his memory be a blessing. Let our future align with the gracious reign of God. Come, Holy Spirit! Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.

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