Sunday, June 3, 1990
**THE BREATH OF GOD**
Genesis 2:7; Acts 2:1-4; John 20:19-22

One of the most extraordinary promises Jesus made to His followers before His crucifixion and resurrection was that they would not be alone once He was gone from them but would experience the power of God's Spirit among them and in their personal lives in a new way. I'm sure they did not fully understand what He was talking about until it happened.

How this promise from Jesus was fulfilled is told in two different stories in the New Testament. In the Book of Acts, we are told that on Pentecost, a Jewish holiday, the followers of Jesus were all together in one place. In that gathering, something unusual and unexpected happened. They felt the power of God's Spirit and energy within them and among them as never before. It was an almost indescribable experience. In his choice of metaphors, Luke compared it to the "rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting," and "to tongues of fire resting on each one of them."

A different account of the gift of God's Spirit and energy to the followers of Jesus is given in the Gospel of John. Here we are told that the followers of Jesus were gathered together on the evening of Easter Sunday, and the doors were locked because they were still afraid of the religious authorities. They had received reports of the resurrection of Jesus, and some of His followers said they had seen Him, but others did not believe them. They were afraid in the same way that we are sometimes afraid and want to lock ourselves in and at the same time lock out the rest of the world.

All of a sudden, in the midst of that frightened group, and in spite of the securely locked door and windows, Jesus stood among them. "Peace be with you," He said. Then He showed them the scars on His hands and side, after which He commissioned them to be apostles by saying, "As God has sent me, even so I send you."

Then Jesus did something that might at first seem strange to us: He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

He breathed on them! Remember the stories of creation in the Old Testament in the first book of the Bible called Genesis? In one of the stories, we have this amazing statement: "Then the Lord God formed man and woman of dust from the ground and breathed into their nostrils the breath of life."

It is no accident that in the Hebrew language, which is the original language of the Old Testament of the Bible, the word for "spirit" is the same as wind or breath. And in the Greek language, which is the original language of the New Testament of the Bible, the word for spirit has the same root as air or breath.

Our ancestors believed that the breath of God was the same as the Spirit of God. So when, in creation, God breathed into man and woman the breath of life, God was breathing into them the very Spirit of God.

The people in Old and New Testament times also believed that as far as we human beings are concerned, one's spirit or life is contained in one's breath. It's not too difficult to understand

how they arrived at this conclusion. Without breath for the human being, there is no life. When one dies, one stops breathing.

At birth too, life outside the mother's womb begins with the baby's breathing on its own. Its heart has already been beating inside the womb for a number of months. But the baby has not been breathing on its own. The necessary supply of oxygen until birth comes through the umbilical cord. So there is an inseparable connection between life and breath.

Thus, the creation story tells us that God breathes into each one of us the breath of life. And with that breath also comes God's Spirit.

Incidentally, for our ancestors in the faith, a mouth-to-mouth kiss was especially intimate because it was the sharing of each other's breath, which they believed was the sharing of each other's spirit or soul.

The Gospel of John's version of the Pentecost story is a kind of retelling of the story of creation. Jesus is re-creating the disciples. And how is He doing it? By giving them the gift of the Holy Spirit, which they already have by virtue of being created by God, but it is now made fresh within them. It's a reminder to them that God's Spirit is within them and with them all the time.

Jesus breathed on them. It was the breath of God. Think of it! We each have within us, from our creation, the breath of God, the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit is nothing else but the continuing presence of God with us and with all people everywhere.

In other words, the first experience of Pentecost or the gift of God's Spirit to each one of us is at our birth when God breathed into us the breath of life.

The story in the Book of Acts about Pentecost reminds us of this in another way. We are told that on that day, there were gathered together in one place people "from every nation under heaven." The storyteller even gives us a partial list of the known nations of that time.

Why does he do that? Obviously, the first thought is that the gospel is universal; it's for everybody in the world. Other writers in the New Testament tell us the same thing. However, what is vital in this story of Pentecost in Acts is that all nations of the earth are present when the Spirit is given when the gospel begins.

Think of what that means. All nations of the earth are not just the destination of the gospel; they are the point of origin of the gospel. Where did it all start? The Europeans said, "We were there when it started." The Africans said, "We were there when it started." From every nation under heaven, the people said, "We were there when it started."

To understand Pentecost, it is necessary to understand that the gospel doesn't just go to the ends of the earth: the ends of the earth are present from the very first day.

The story of Pentecost reminds us that there is no second-hand, third-hand, or fourth-hand faith. There is no church or nation that can say, "It belonged to us, and now we are going to give it to you through our benevolent evangelism and mission work." We were all there that first day, in the same way that God has breathed into each and every human being the breath of life, which is the breath of God.

Pentecost removes all ground for any sense of triumphalism, for that ugly sense of arrogance and superiority that takes over the church sometimes simply because we get the notion that the salvation of other people in the world depends on our behavior. The Book of Acts says it all started in all the world at the same time. And that's what the Book of Genesis says too: "Then the Lord God formed man and woman from the dust of the ground and breathed into their nostrils the breath of life."

Nowhere do we read that God only breathed into one kind of people or one race or nation or one group of people the "breath of life." God's Spirit is breathed into each one of us everywhere at the moment of our birth.

God's Spirit is always at work everywhere in the world, and many times we are not aware of it until later.

When Communist China was closed to the United States and to the West in 1959, there were six hundred thousand Protestant Christians and about one million Roman Catholic Christians in China. When China was reopened in 1979, there were more than three million Protestant Christians and more than three million Catholic Christians, and we weren't over there doing the converting. How did that happen? Pentecost says that the beginning point as well as the destination of the gospel is the whole world.

Although this Spirit of God, which we call the Holy Spirit, is within each one of us from birth, it sometimes seems to become dormant, or we cover it up, or forget it is there, so it needs to be awakened, or we need to be reminded that it is there.

That's what Jesus did when He breathed on the disciples. He called that Spirit forth, which was already present. Or, as I said earlier, Jesus was "re-creating" the disciples.

It seems to me that's also what happened in the Pentecost story in the Book of Acts. There we are told that the people in the audience listening to the preaching of the Apostles each heard the message in his or her own language. It's another way of saying that no listener to the gospel message is ever totally spiritually dead. Each one needs to hear the good news of God's love in his or her own situation.

Thus, when the Apostles preached to people who knew the Old Testament of the Bible, they could say, "You know the prophets, you know Moses and the law. You already know that when God created you, God breathed into you the Holy Spirit, the breath of God."

But when the early preachers moved out beyond the reach of Moses, the law, and the prophets, beyond any knowledge of the Bible or the life of Jesus, what did they say? They said, "Listen, friends, we come to you as people of a common nature, created from a common God, the beneficiaries of a common providence, to talk about a God who has never been without witness in the world, seeing that God gives to everyone goodness and rain and fruitful seasons and makes glad the human heart."

They were saying, "What we came to preach to you about redemption concerns the same God you know through creation. There is a continuity with what you already have discovered."

When the Apostle Paul came to the Areopagus, he said, "This unknown God of yours is the subject of my sermon." He could not refer to the Old Testament or even the life of Jesus. He said, "There is one God who created all of us, a God who gave us life in appointed times and

places for us to live. This God who created every one of us with a certain reaching, longing, seeking in our hearts. This is a God who has stirred even your own poets to say, 'In God we live and move and have our being.'" And so he continued his message. Paul was working to awaken the Spirit of God, which was already in them through birth.

The Book of Acts begins the story of the Church, insisting that there was something in the listener that recognized the truth of the gospel, call it what we will. There is a hunger in the world for what the gospel offers.

One theologian put it this way: "Even the systems of tyranny in the world are but perversions of this same longing, seeking capacity of the human spirit. When Adolf Hitler sold his program to the German people, he didn't sell prisons and ovens and genocide. You know what he sold? He spoke of a way to peace and joy, of every home a quiet place, of children happy and well. Did Germany want that? Of course! Then came the means, the painful necessary steps. Holocaust! I do not seek to excuse anyone but rather to say the German people didn't vote for holocaust. They voted for something for which people everywhere search, search, and search."

When Karl Marx sold the Russian people on a system of communism, he didn't sell them on the idea, "Let's get rid of forty million Ukrainians; let's put microphones in every public building; let's suspect, watch, imprison, exile." He didn't sell them that. What he sold was, "From each according to ability, to each according to need, so that all may…" What a wonderful thing. The most terrible systems of the human race are distortions of a longing for peace, quiet, and love. The depths to which people sink are but another register of the world. Never. Anywhere.

The Old Testament calls it the breath of God: the Holy Spirit. It's within each one of us and working in the world. You may have forgotten about this breath of God in you. It's possible that you have been attempting to live your life without God. Yet deep within yourself, you know there is a life of better quality and with more joy and peace. The good news is that this new kind of life can begin again for you here and now. The breath of God, the Holy Spirit, is within you. It's waiting to be reawakened in order to be the guiding force in your life. Amen.