Sunday, June 4, 1995
THE BREATH OF LIFE
Acts 2:1-4; John 20:19-22

One of the most extraordinary statements in the Old Testament of the Bible about our relationship with God as human beings is found in the book of Genesis: “So God formed humankind from the dust of the ground and breathed into them the breath of life, and they became living beings.”

One of the most extraordinary promises in the New Testament of the Bible about our relationship with God as human beings is contained in the promise which Jesus made to his followers before his crucifixion and resurrection. The promise was that they would not be alone once he was gone from them, but would experience the power of God’s Holy Spirit in and among them in a new way.

How this promise 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 religious 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, just as Jesus had promised.

It is no accident that in his choice of metaphors to describe the event, Luke compared it to the “rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting.” Luke also compared it to “tongues of fire resting on each one of them.”

The second account of the experience of God’s Holy Spirit following the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus is described 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 authorities. The followers of Jesus had received reports of the resurrection of Jesus, and some of the disciples had seen him, but others did not believe them.

All of a sudden, in the midst of that frightened group, 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 which might at first seem strange to us: “He breathed on them, and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” He breathed on them and connected that act with their receiving the Holy Spirit! Remember in the beginning of this sermon that quotation from the creation story in Genesis: “Then God formed humankind from the dust of the ground and breathed into them the breath of life.”

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

Our ancestors in the faith believed that the breath of God was the Spirit of God. So when, in creating human beings, God breathed into us the breath of life, God was breathing into us the very Spirit of God.

Our ancestors in the faith also believed that as far as we human beings are concerned, our spirit or life is contained in our 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 also, 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 many 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.

So 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.

Connected to this idea, 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 also 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 his disciples. And how is he doing it? By renewing within them the gift of God's Holy Spirit, which in the deepest sense they already had by virtue of being created by God. Jesus was reminding them that God's Spirit is always with them.

Jesus breathed on them. It was the breath of God, which is the breath of life. Each one of us has within us from the beginning of our creation this same breath of life, which is a part of God's Spirit. Our first experience of Pentecost is the gift of God's Spirit at birth when God breathes into us the breath of life.

The story of Pentecost in the Book of Acts tells us even more about this remarkable gift of God's Breath or Spirit. On that day, the Bible says there were gathered together in one place people from every nation under heaven. What does that tell us? It tells us that the gospel is universal. It's for everyone in the world. Other stories in the Bible make the same point — the story of Abraham, the Book of Jonah are but two examples from the Old Testament.

What the Pentecost story in Acts underscores is that all the nations of the world are represented when God's Spirit is poured out in a new way.

Think of what this means. All nations of the earth are not the destination of the Gospel; they are the point of origin of the Gospel. Where did it all start? The Europeans said, "With us. We were there when it started." The Africans said, "We were there when it started." According to the story in Acts — people from every nation under heaven were there when it started.

This means that no one group of people or nation can say in truth, "It belonged to us, and now we are going to give it to you through our 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.

The story of creation and the story of Pentecost remove all grounds for any kind of arrogance and superiority that frequently infects the church because we get the notion that salvation belongs to us and only we can give it to others as if we have a monopoly on God's Spirit.

Nowhere do we read that God only breathed the breath of life into one kind of people or race or nation. God's Spirit is breathed into each one of us everywhere from 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.

For example, 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 Roman 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 point of the gospel is the whole world.

Although the Spirit of God, which we call the Holy Spirit, is within each one of us from birth, it can become dormant. We cover it up or forget it is there. Therefore, it needs to be rediscovered, or we need to be reminded that it is there.

That's what Jesus was doing when he breathed on the disciples. He called that spirit forth, which was already present.

I believe that's also what happened in the Pentecost story in the Book of Acts. The people in that audience from many nations heard the good news of God's love in their own language, and it rekindled God's Spirit, which was already in them. It happens over and over again.

The Bible calls God's Spirit "the Breath of God" and "the Breath of Life." 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 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 allowed to reawaken in order to be the guiding force in your life. Amen.