

Weaving with the Spirit

A prompting offered by Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
May 30-31, 2009 • Pentecost
Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon 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 turned to darkness and the moon 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.'"

***And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind,
and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.***

Acts 2:2

Here lately there have been signs that Gideon is starting to read. He is starting to make the connection that letters can form words. One of the words he readily identifies is "God." Maybe it is because he is a P.K. (a preacher's kid), or maybe not, but he lets me know when he sees the word "God." He'll say, "Hey papa, there's God." And he seems to see the word "God" frequently: on signs, in the church bulletin, or in a book or journal or newspaper I may be reading when he cuddles up next to me.

But I tell you, when he says, 'Hey papa, there's God,' it can be quite unsettling! Part of the unsettling is the directness and certainty of the statement. I, and I dare say most of you, don't encounter God in obvious and concrete ways.

My experience with Gideon reminds me of a story that Marcus Borg told when he visited our church back in 2005. He records this story in his book *THE HEART OF CHRISTIANITY: REDISCOVERING A LIFE OF FAITH*. I have never forgotten this story and it still haunts me! Borg said:

Several years ago I was told a story about a three-year-old girl. She was the firstborn and only child in her family, but now her mother was pregnant again, and the little girl was very excited about having a new brother or sister. Within a few hours of the parents bringing a new baby boy home from the hospital, the girl made a request: she wanted to be alone with her new brother in his room with the door shut. Her insistence about being alone with the baby with the door shut made her parents a bit uneasy, but then they remembered that they had installed an intercom system in anticipation of the baby's arrival, so they realized they could let their daughter do this, and if they heard the slightest indication that anything strange was happening, they could be in the baby's room in an instant.

So they let the little girl go into the baby's room, shut the door, and raced to the intercom listening station. They heard their daughter's footsteps moving across the baby's room, imagined her standing over the baby's crib, and then they heard her saying to her three-day-old brother, "Tell me about God – I've almost forgotten." (The Heart of Christianity, page 113-114)

For anyone to say, especially a child to say, "Hey Papa, there's God" or "Tell me about God – I've almost forgotten," can be a little startling for sure.

Many of us here at Cross Creek tend to approach the subject of God a little more tentatively, a little more guardedly, and are quite fine with leaving our understanding of God a bit more messy and a bit more ambiguous. Less "all figured out." Less certain. Many of us have had experiences where God, and talk of God, was more a source of guilt than grace, more an exercise in putting limits on God rather than an exercise in expanding our awareness and experience of God. And so, our gut reaction is to resist any glib or absolute talk of God. And the truth be told, many of us bare the scars from those in our past who have.

But I have noticed a change among us. Oh, the scars remain. And our antennae will still pick up and react quickly to any guilt inducing, abusive, pontificating reference to God. But something new is happening here at Cross Creek. Not a big, big something new. Not a dramatic something new. But a more quiet, not so obvious something new. And from what I can tell, this new thing is occurring outside of Cross Creek, too. My sense is that people seem to be more willing to talk about God. More of us seem willing to explore our feelings and thoughts about this mysterious God we worship. Not necessarily more belief. Not more certainty. But more honest sharing of questions and insights and experiences. Maybe more hunger for God. Certainly less embarrassment. Less awkwardness. Less shyness – about God.

But let's admit up front. There is a good case to be made against God, even the existence of God. What seems to be real is what we can touch and taste and smell and see and hear. Perhaps most people today settle for this materialistic vision, ignoring everything that cannot be experienced by the five senses. It's the way life seems to work.

But the physicists have been telling us for a while now that the opposite is true – things are not what they seem! They insist that this "solid" material world is an illusion. And so is the Altar Table and the chairs you are sitting in. These are made up of energy fields, constantly moving and changing. Their vision is not unlike the mystics' vision of a reality marvelously interconnected, full of paradox and surprise. The way physicists describe it, what we have is a relational universe that is like a continuous dance of energy. And what I've been able to glean from these physicists, in spite of being scientifically challenged, is simply this: things are not what they seem!

And it does seem that life is neutral. Life seems to be just there – we are born into life and we make of it what we can. It appears to be like the river, just there, not caring whether we sink or swim. That is certainly the way it seems. It all appears so clear and simple. As long as there is breath, there is life. And how many times we new parents slip beside the baby's crib during the night and lean way over into the crib just to assure ourselves – "Yes! He is still breathing." Or, we put our ear to the breast of a loved one or place a feather beneath her nostrils, saying to ourselves – "Yes, thank God she is still living." That is the way it seems – life is neutral, there when we are breathing and gone when we die.

But the people of faith have insisted: Things are not what they seem! Life is not neutral. There is a life force that cares whether you sink or swim. It wants you to swim. It is for you, not against you, or even neutral. It wishes you well and is constantly luring you toward healing and wholeness...toward our loving potential...toward justice for all. The most common name for this life force has been – God.

I still find this to be an incredible affirmation. What a daring declaration of faith that counters the way life seems on the surface. Yet it is the very possibility around which we gather in worship week after week. It's our deepest "reason for being." It is the reason we as a church have adopted a plan called "A Way Into the Future" and why we will gather for a congregational meeting on June 14th to decide if we want to continue to move that plan forward as we envision the future for our church. That is why we sing words like the ones we sang in our gathering hymn: "Restless Weaver, still conceiving new life – now and yet to be"

Astounding, I still find it to be, that we depend so much on a mystery we cannot precisely describe and a possibility that challenges and disrupts our usual ways of seeing things. Amazing,

I still find it to be, that so many of us are willing to explore this view of life and even bet our lives on its validity and relevance.

But who is this God to you?

Since it is Pentecost Sunday, I want to explore one way God has been imaged and experienced down through the years: God as Spirit. It is captured in the Hebrew word for Spirit, "ruach." What a powerful word this is. For the Hebrew it means "wind": the sudden, scorching wind of the desert. I picture the Hebrew Bedouin of the wilderness sand, standing in front of his tent, feeling this forceful wind on his face, saying out loud – "Ah, this best describes the powerful and prophetic insight of Amos or Moses or Isaiah...this wind is like the extraordinary inspiration of a poet or sculptor or musician...or the magnetic enthusiasm of a leader." "Ruach," this Spirit of God, this wind of God, is the power that sets free the knowledge and creativity latent within us, welling up from our very depths, driving us often in surprising and unsettling ways.

And "Ruach," for the Hebrew, is also the word for "breath," describing a more intimate aspect of God's spirit. What could be more intimate and essential than breath – the difference between life and death. Ezekiel, who we will look at closely next weekend, is one who images the hope for the discouraged Jews in exile in this way: "It is like God picking up those of us in exile as dead bones and breathing new life into us, connecting us up in to living harmony of beauty and usefulness." "Ruach," that is God...God is breath, the Hebrew of faith insists.

This is who God is: God is Wind, God is Breath...what we call "Spirit." Count on it – God is that force that is always blowing and wanting to breathe new life into us...God is that spirit hovering over our chaos always urging us to connect through love and be united in shalom, in peace, enabling us to do together what we cannot be or do separately. God – the Spirit who breathes and blows.

"Ruach" gives me an entry point to help me name who God is. God imaged and experienced like breath or wind...God as Spirit. But let me take this insight a step further – this Spirit of God breathes and blows change! That is, God is experienced where transformation is occurring. That is certainly the place Jesus suggested we look. We can see this truth in that interesting encounter between Jesus and the disciples of John the Baptist. Picture John the Baptist in prison...his days are numbered. He just has to know. Is Jesus the Special One, the Messiah? When he baptized Jesus, he thought so. But now he isn't so sure. Jesus certainly wasn't following his expectations for the job of "Messiah." So John sends a few of his disciples to check out Jesus. They ask him, "Are you the One, or are we wait for another?"

Note how Jesus answers them. He does not explain himself. He does not defend his ministry. Rather he says: "Experience what is happening. Then go and tell John. Tell him about the changes you see – people throwing away their crutches...others seeing what they had been blind to...still others who were dead now coming to life again...and tell him about the poor who hear my news as good and hopeful. Go tell John about the transformations occurring. It's where God breathes and blows." (Luke 7:18-23)

"And yes," the Hebrew would add, "The spirit of God is like – not only the wind as power – but also the wind as unpredictable." It is the thing about the wind that Jesus noted – you never quite know when or where it will blow. Jesus said, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (John 3:8)

All of this brings us to our biblical text today...the story of Pentecost and the birth of the church:

"And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."

What we have here is another story of "Ruach," the Spirit of God ...still breathing and blowing.

And the word "violent" reminds us that our encounter with God's spirit can have an edge to it. Luke, the writer of the Book of Acts, describes the Christian Pentecost experience in the most vivid and outlandish terms: a rushing violent wind; divided tongues of fire; people miraculously speaking in other languages.

Celtic Christians imaged the Spirit as a wild goose. And we who live around here know how loud and obnoxious geese can be...and violent too if you get near one of their eggs or goslings. They know how to make a mess, they crash into cars, and they can bring traffic on Miamisburg-Centerville Road to a dead stop. And after reading our Pentecost story, it just seems to me that the Celtic Christians got it right. God's spirit is more wild goose than peaceful dove. Wind, fire, dancing tongues, wild geese, all of this bizarre and chaotic stuff is attributed to the Spirit of God breathing and blowing.

Our imaginations are stirred and our curiosity is certainly piqued by the Pentecost story in Acts. This scene...this Pentecost experience...is one of the most beautiful, and at the same time quite disturbing, descriptions of a holy event found anywhere in the Bible or any other sacred writ for that matter. The use of such graphic and expansive language tells me this was no ordinary event. It tells me that not even language itself was very capable of capturing the full impact of that day. Sally McFague calls an experience like this "wild space" – that place in the life of the church and God's people when the creative spirit of God is unleashed and amazing things begin to happen.

And Pentecost Sunday is a reminder to us who seek to follow in the way of Jesus, who seek to gather in a community of faith, to pay attention!... for God is a Still Breathing, Still Blowing, Still Speaking kind of God. Pentecost Sunday is an opportunity for us to reclaim our call to be a community so attune to the same spirit of God active in the Jewish people, active in the ministry of Jesus, active in *that* Pentecost moment long ago, and active in communities of faith everywhere where transformations of all kinds just keep happening:

a place where dry bones are brought to life at the word of God: "I will put my spirit within you and you shall live" (Ezek. 37:14);

a place where some people are throwing away their crutches...and others are seeing what they had been blind to...and still others dead in some ways coming to life...and a place where what is seen and heard and experienced here is deemed good new and hopeful news by the poor and the marginalized in our community;

a place where people very different from one another can come together in love and peace and justice.

God's spirit is like the intimate breath of love and the powerful wind of transformation...a God who breathes and blows.

And our part? What shall our response be to this breathing, blowing Spirit of God? Or, as the bewildered, amazed, and perplexed folks asked as they stood in *that* Pentecost moment: "*What does this mean?*" I want to suggest this morning that it means our part is lowering our resistance. It means our part is creating that "wild space" and making room for God's spirit to breathe and blow. It means our part is daring to raise our sails, trusting that in time the wind will blow. It means our part is being open to holy disruption and the new thing...the change...the transformation...that God is doing. It means our part is being vulnerable to God's intimate whispers of grace and breath of love. It means our part is being willing to weave with the Spirit as we pray:

Spirit of the living God, weave anew with us
Spirit of the living God, weave anew with us
Spin us, mend us, knit us, use us
Spirit of the living God, weave anew with us.

May it be so for us, breathing, blowing God! Amen.