

## The Holy Spirit Can't Breathe

*Acts 2:1-21; John 20:19-23*

There's a common breath to scripture... From Genesis: *"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters..."* God breathed the Holy Spirit, and all life came into being.

From Exodus: *"But Moses said to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?' 14 God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.'"* In the Hebrew of this passage, God's name is represented by the four letters: Yod-Heh-Vav-Heh. Ha'shem, the name of God, cannot be spoken. There are some Hebrew scholars and Rabbis who have taught over the years that the name of God cannot be spoken because these letters make the unpronounceable sound of breathing... Yod-Heh-Vav-Heh. To breathe, is to speak the name of God. Every moment of our day, we are speaking the promise of the divine. Our life begins the day we speak the name of God. Our life ends when we can no longer say God's name.

From Ezekiel: *"Then [the Lord] said to me, 'prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.'" I prophesied as he commanded me and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude."* God breathed the Holy Spirit through Ezekiel and a whole valley of very dry bones lived.

From Luke: *"While they were there, the time came for [Mary] to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."* With the smell of animals and feed and manure and sweat and tears and love in the air, Christ drew his first breath.

From Matthew: *"At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to [Jesus] to drink. But the others said, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.'" Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last."* Under cruelty and mockery, hung from a tree by the oppression of the empire, Christ couldn't breathe.

From Today's Gospel: *"Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'" 22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'"* Some refer to this scene from today's gospel as John's Pentecost. In the upper room, the first giving of the Holy Spirit. Christ breathes new life and new hope into his followers. He breathes his peace. This peace doesn't change the fearful things outside their locked rooms, but it gives them hope to face it. And the promise remains that soon God will pour out the Holy Spirit on all people, that all may know God's way of peace.

From Acts: *"When the day of Pentecost had come, [the apostles] were all together in one place. 2And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."* And the promise is fulfilled. The power of the Holy Spirit breathes once again and the world is made a new creation. The Holy Spirit breathed through Peter, and Christ's denier, the one who was constantly the questioner of the disciples, rises to proclaim the promises of God's redemption and salvation that the prophets foretold. A movement, a hope, a church is born amongst fire and breath. The Holy Spirit speaks, the Holy Spirit cleanses, the Holy Spirit breathes, and new life begins.

Breath is such a central part of God's story. Breath is life, and the Holy Spirit breathes through us each day with grace, and hope, and love, and mercy. Breath is life, and the Holy Spirit breathed on Pentecost and continues to breathe across all nations and all tongues the promise of Christ's redemption. We see splayed across the scriptures, across God's name, across the prophets, across all time the power of breath, and the God who breathes new life into all creation. But it's so hard to preach that promise today, when **the Holy Spirit Can't Breathe**.

We're supposed to celebrate the promise of Pentecost, while the prevailing phrase of today is "I can't breathe."

The Holy Spirit, the God given breath of life, was choked out of George Floyd live on camera under the knee of a Minneapolis Police Officer for 8 whole minutes on Monday. Another black man killed by those sworn to serve and protect him, in a nation where black folks make up only 13% of the American population, but made up 24% of those killed by police in 2019.<sup>1</sup>

The Holy Spirit, the God given breath of life, was choked out of the crowds who gathered, chanting George's final words of "I can't breathe", and protesting his death and all these extrajudicial killings, as pepper spray, a new and sinister Pentecost fire, rained down on them.

The Holy Spirit, the God given breath of life, has been stripped from over 104,000 of our neighbors in this country and 365,000 of our neighbors across the world and thousands more lie on respirators clinging desperately to the Spirit of life, as the respiratory illness COVID-19 ravages our world. A virus should be a great equalizer, all of us susceptible, but **again**, Black Americans represent 13% of the population in all areas in the U.S. releasing COVID mortality data, but they have suffered 25% of deaths.<sup>2</sup> Inequity in healthcare access and disregard for the lives and safety of those in essential service professions have led to people of color disproportionately being killed by this virus.

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<sup>1</sup> "Fatal Force" from the Washington Post: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/national/police-shootings-2019/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race>

The Holy Spirit, the God given breath of life, has been stripped from Ahmaud Arbery by white vigilantes as he went for a run, from Breonna Taylor when police raided the wrong house, and from countless other persons of color and indigenous peoples in this country time and time again. From Emmitt Till to Dr. King, from Trayvon to Tamir, from Mike Brown to Eric Garner to Sandra Bland and Philando Castille and the countless others who have been immortalized by Hashtags in this generation as racism and white supremacy continue to put their knee on the neck of persons of color in this country... as racism and white supremacy continue to put their knee on the neck of the Holy Spirit in this country.

So what does Pentecost look like when **The Holy Spirit Can't Breathe?**

Perhaps it looks much like it did 2000 years ago, with God's people in the midst of fire and smoke, streaming into the streets to proclaim loudly and with myriad voices God's vision of liberation for those under bondage to the systemic sins of this world. Perhaps it will look like a church full of people who in good faith say enough is enough, Black Lives Matter and racism is killing us. Perhaps it looks like a united body of Christ, with white folks who are willing to learn and listen to voices of color around them who have been teaching about white privilege and micro-aggressions and the racism woven into the fabric of our nation. Perhaps it will look like white folks allowing black folks to lead the way and listen to what is needed for liberation, and dismantling systems that deny the dignity and worth of black lives, and centralize whiteness as the norm to which all should assimilate. Perhaps Pentecost will look like a church that knows it is made more beautiful by our diversity of members and thought, and that Black Theology, and Feminist Theology, and Womanist Theology, and Queer Theology aren't all just footnotes and subcategories of White Men's Theology that we just call "theology". Perhaps this pentecost will look like a movement that is rooted in love and hope and redemption and restoration and peace that isn't just the absence of violence but is the presence of justice for all people. And perhaps we'll see in this modern day pentecost that the Holy Spirit—the ancient breath of life that makes all things new—will once again be out front leading the way. Pentecost is when the Holy Spirit gives voice and hope to the movement of redemption and love in this world, if not with breath, then with cleansing fire!

If we're not proclaiming hope and dignity for all people—especially the marginalized—then we're not celebrating Pentecost. Come Holy Spirit, fill our hearts!

If we're not proclaiming justice that values human life and resists those who would perpetuate evil systems of holding the poor under power, then we're not celebrating Pentecost. Come Holy Spirit, fill our hearts!

Pentecost is a celebration of the earth's wide diversity and God's delight to share love throughout this diversity. Pentecost wasn't about one voice that was heard by all, but about God meeting everyone in their own way that love may be understood. If we're not proclaiming that racism and white supremacy have no place in the kingdom of God, then we're not celebrating Pentecost. Come Holy Spirit, fill our hearts!

In my reading of this Pentecost story this year, I was gripped by a line I've never considered before. In verses 12 and 13 we hear the two responses of the crowd. It says, "All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, *"What does this mean?"* But others **sneered** and said, "They are filled with new wine." These two responses, one that *sneers* and casts baseless accusations on the character of this crowd, and one that stops and faithfully asks "**What does this mean?**" Perhaps instead of sneering "they are destroying their own city" maybe we can ask ourselves "what does this mean?" In this faithful question, perhaps we'll hear that it's a cry of desperation, from a people long unheard. In his lifetime that was cut far too short by white supremacy, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke to this very question about scorn and intrigue in the face of riots. Dr. King said, *"Let me say as I've always said, and I will always continue to say, that riots are socially destructive and self-defeating. ... But in the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it that America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the plight of the Negro poor has worsened over the last few years. It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice, equality, and humanity. And so in a real sense our nation's summers of riots are caused by our nation's winters of delay. And as long as America postpones justice, we stand in the position of having these recurrences of violence and riots over and over again."* What does this mean? What have we failed to hear? Hundreds of voices were spoken on Pentecost, and not all of them would be understood. What have we failed to understand in this voice of anger that so many want to scorn? What have we failed to hear when we were more upset at property burned than at black men killed? Church, it's time to **LISTEN**. Come Holy Spirit, give us ears to hear your people's cry.

Pentecost is hope, Pentecost is joy, Pentecost is deeply troubling, Pentecost is justice that turns our world upside down. Pentecost is about a cleansing fire that makes all things new. Christ breathed peace on his disciples, but peace must be hand in hand with justice. When the Holy Spirit can't breathe, she shows up in our lives with fire, cleansing the way, and blazing the path toward God's way of making all things new. Then, the Holy Spirit will breathe new life, after the sins that have held us and our neighbors in bondage have been broken.

I know we'd like to put this news off at a distance. For many of us we don't want to talk about these things. I know I've gone all in on this today, but maybe it's Pentecost and I'm feeling the fire, but we can't put this off. If not now, when? We're already too late for George Floyd and so many others. From our place of privilege, it's easy for white folks not to talk about racism and how we resist it. Because our lives don't depend on it. But our neighbor's lives do. Jesus tells us clearly, that should matter.

Racism and White Supremacy are sinful. It is the Church's responsibility to name these sins and resist them, because for so long we have failed to teach our nation how to love. It's scary to talk about these things, But we must talk about these issues with our families, our neighbors, and our friends, and give no room for hatred or white-supremacy. This is a difficult task, because white-supremacy has been woven into the fabric of our nation from the very first moment our ancestors decided to kidnap, sell, and enslave human beings for the color of their skin. This hatred has been woven into the fabric of our

nation from the first moment we drove out the indigenous people because they were considered primitive.

We must work to overcome hundreds of years of history, but the work must be done here and now. Not for our salvation's sake, but for the liberation of our neighbor. We are Christ followers. We are people of Pentecost. And if we truly mean that, then we will follow the Holy Spirit's guidance in making all things new. *"The ELCA's social statement, "Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity and Culture" states: "Racism—a mix of power, privilege, and prejudice—is sin, a violation of God's intention for humanity. The resulting racial, ethnic, or cultural barriers deny the truth that all people are God's creatures and, therefore, persons of dignity. Racism fractures and fragments both church and society.""*

Our world is fractured, and our own body, Christ's own body is broken. The Holy Spirit Can't Breathe. So when the spirit can't breathe, let us carry the Spirit's fire forward to cleanse our lives from this sin, to repent from the ways we have failed to meet our neighbors with compassion and care, to repair the breach as only the Spirit can, and walk forward as a new creation in hope, love, and with dignity for all. Come Holy Spirit, with fire and breath, make us new.

Amen.