

INSPIRATION

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 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. 3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. 5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 6 And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. 7 Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. 44 All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:1-8, 42-47, NRSV)

When was the last time you felt truly inspired? Did you write a poem or a letter, plant a garden or pick a flower, encourage a friend or find courage yourself? Where does inspiration come from? The ancient Greeks believed in the inspiration of the muse, one of the nine daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, each of the daughters being a goddess of one of the arts (<http://www.bartleby.com/65/mu/Muses.html>). I believe in inspiration too, inspiration from God, nature, the arts, and other people.

Today's scripture lesson talks about inspiration, the inspiration the disciples received on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit filled them to overflowing in a mighty and miraculous way. The setting could not have been more appropriate as the old city of Jerusalem brimmed with faithful Jews who had come to celebrate the Feast of Pentecost, the day traditionally associated with God giving Moses the Law on Mt. Sinai some 50 days after Passover (*Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*, Paul J. Achtemeier, editor, 1996, p. 826).

The disciples were still in Jerusalem. It had been 50 days since Christ's Resurrection, 10 days since his Ascension into heaven. Gathered together in a house, the disciples must have been startled by what sounded like a loud rushing wind from heaven. The scriptures tell us that something looking like tongues of fire appeared above each of their heads, that they were filled with the Holy Spirit and that miraculously, they began to speak in languages they had never been taught. This gift of language allowed them to communicate the good news of Jesus, God's messiah, to all of the people from various nations who had come to celebrate Pentecost. This story was written down by the

Apostle Luke in the Book of Acts. The miracle of Pentecost came as a fulfillment of Jesus' promise to send God's Spirit to the disciples.

There is a different account of Jesus giving the disciples God's Spirit found in the Gospel of John (20:19-23). In this story, it is Easter evening and the disciples have already seen the risen Christ earlier in the morning. Now they are gathered behind locked doors and Jesus appears to them. After showing them his scarred hands and side he says to them, "Peace be with you. As God has sent me, so I send you." And then he breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." I take this last part to mean that in order for people to experience God's grace and forgiveness, the disciples must share with them their newfound faith.

It is this first image, of Jesus breathing on the disciples that is so intriguing. The words here are so similar to the creation account in Genesis 2 when God breathes the breath of life into Adam and makes him a living being. Likewise, Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit of God into the hearts and lives of the disciples that they might be re-created, that they might become spiritually alive (John 20:22 footnote, *NRSV The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 1991).

It is interesting to note that the Latin word *spiritus*, just like its counterparts in Hebrew and Greek, originally meant *breath* (Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, Harper San Francisco, 1993, p. 110). Minister and author Frederick Buechner notes that, "Breath is what you have when you're alive... Thus spirit = breath = life, the aliveness and power of your life, and to speak of your spirit (or soul) is to speak of the power of life that is in you... [God] is Spirit... Thus God is the power of the power of life itself, has breathed and continues to breathe himself (*sic.*) into his creation. In-spires it" (Ibid. pp. 110-111).

When we reflect on the Spirit of God filling the disciples we observe how the life of God entered and overflowed the very lives of the disciples. The power of God came alive in them and they would never be the same. And the world wouldn't be the same either. As dramatic and far removed as this story seems, I believe that we have the same access to God's Holy Spirit as did the disciples. For most of us, the experience will not be like the Day of Pentecost when God's Spirit entered the disciples lives like a holy cyclone. On the contrary, most of us are more likely to experience God's Spirit like the disciples with the risen Christ, in whispers and gentle breaths. However God's Spirit comes, it comes to in-spire us, to bring us life.

I don't know about you, but some days I feel more alive than others. Some days I just go through the motions and get through the day as best I can. On my better days though, I am more alive, more aware of life around me. On these inspired days my senses take in more—the smell of the morning coffee, the sound of the chirping birds, the feel of Matthew's soft cheek when I hug him, the sight of the nursery school children playing in the courtyard, the breath inflating and deflating my lungs. On these inspired days I have more to give too. I smile more, listen better, think clearer, feel deeper, and

laugh more easily. And on these in-spired days, these days when the power of life is more alive in me, I feel more inspired. When I'm lucky, it happens on a Friday when I am writing my sermon!

I believe that God has something to do with this inspiration, this infusion of energy that so often accompanies moments of creativity, imagination, and ingenuity. God's Spirit can inspire us to see life itself and our own lives differently and this change of perspective can make a world of difference. How can we get this inspiration? Unfortunately there is no simple formula. However, I believe we can increase our chances by the way we live. The closer we get to God, the Source of all life and creativity, the more likely we are to find the inspiration we need. It all has to do with spiritual growth, with opening ourselves to the Spirit of God, to be filled.

UCC minister Frederic Brussat and his wife Mary Ann wrote a book entitled, *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life* (Scribner, 1996). In their book, they encourage us to learn to read the signs of the Spirit in daily life and to see the web that connects us to other people and the natural world. They maintain that as we become more spiritually literate, we will experience "intimations of 'something more'" in our work, leisure, and relationships (p. 26). Spiritual literacy has less to do with reading volumes of spiritual literature (not that we wouldn't benefit from it) and more to do with paying attention to our lives and being present in the moment. Spiritual literacy develops as we learn to appreciate beauty, practice silence, and get caught up in the wonder and mystery of life itself. Spiritual literacy increases as we treat others and ourselves with kindness, forgiveness, and love (Ibid. pp. 19-25).

When we reflect on the disciples' lives after Pentecost we see that they had a surge of spiritual literacy, as they got in touch with God's transforming Spirit. After Pentecost, they were inspired to leave the locked room, to go out and proclaim their faith in Christ. After Pentecost they were inspired to share all they had that none among them would ever be hungry. After Pentecost they were inspired to bring the possibility of healing and wholeness to everyone open to God's Spirit.

I wonder what God has in store for us as a church. I wonder how God will inspire us as individuals and as a family of faith. Will we have to listen closely for whispers or will we be overwhelmed with clarity and vision? However it comes this much we know, God has been inspiring believers for 2,000 years. If we listen and act accordingly, God will inspire us as well to do wonderful works of love, mercy, and beauty in the name of Christ. AMEN.

Written by Rev. Jimmy Only

Edited by Colleen Brown Only

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The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

PASTORAL PRAYER

Most merciful God, Author of creation and Artist of the universe, we praise and thank you for life and love. You inspire us daily with glowing pink sunsets and tiny golden flowers, with giggling children and singing birds. Forgive us for those times when we close our ears to your gentle whispers. Open us up to the inspiration of your Spirit, that we might soak in the miracle and beauty of life, that we might find faith and know hope.

And now, O God, speak to us in these moments together through Jesus Christ we pray.
AMEN.