



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

---

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR

THE FEAST OF PENTECOST, MAY 28, 2023

ACTS 2:1-21; PSALM 104: 25-35, 37; 1 CORINTHIANS 12:3b-13; JOHN 7:37-39

## HOLY SPIRIT, THE GIVER OF LIFE



Blessings on this Feast of Pentecost!

Today we get the Holy Spirit, but what does that even mean?

I'm reminded of a joke—the sort that I tell on pilgrimages that evokes groans from those on the bus with me:

A priest is walking through the jungle and comes face to face with a lion. He crosses

himself and prays, “Lord, please instill the holy spirit in this lion’s heart.”

The lion stops in his tracks as an aura of light surrounds him. He puts his paws together, looks to heaven and says, “Lord, thank you for this meal.”

Today we get the Holy Spirit, but what does that even mean?

Fred Buechner, who died last year at age 96, is known for his pithy wisdom and great preaching. He once said that “*the word spirit has come to mean something pale and shapeless, like an unmade bed...*” It conjures the image for me of throwing the bed sheet over you and walk around like a roaming ghost. There’s a certain triteness to it.

The word *spiritual* often carries a derogatory tone in our time; the word *inspirational* is even worse.<sup>ii</sup> Inspirational books and speakers are deemed a dime a dozen, and often conflate probative meaning and mushy pablum.

Perhaps that’s all a bit cynical, so I wonder if we might come from another tack.

The Latin word *spiritus* literally means breath. Buechner said “*breath is what you have when you’re alive and don’t have when you’re dead.*”

Spirit, then, is breath, the power of life in you. The mystery of life is somehow bound up in this breath, this spirit. Life is this

breakthrough mystery that somehow becomes aware of itself, its being, its breath. And becomes aware of other living things sharing that breath. The seahorse and sagebrush share in this mystery, as do we.

But how does this spirit manifest? Well...

Have you wept over something in recent weeks? That’s the spirit.

Have you laughed aloud; the sort that comes from deep in the gut? That’s the spirit.

Have you sung a tune, just for yourself to lighten your being? That’s the spirit.

None of these can happen without breath. They mean you’re alive.

In the Creed we say we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life. The Spirit is God, the Spirit is the gift of life, breathing life into creation...in-spiring it, inspiring you. The mystery of life, deeply seated and broadly shared.

At baptism we pray for those who arise from the living waters beseeching the Spirit to bestow on them inquiring and discerning hearts, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love God, and the gift of joy and wonder in all creation. These are measures of aliveness, having been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.

These are the verbs of agency in a life of faithful response to God’s gift of breath that

inspires us: to inquire, discern, to will and persevere, to know and to love, to wonder.

Today we get the Holy Spirit, which is to say, we remember our baptism, and the living waters, and the breath that lights on us and enthuses us to be the beloved creatures we are. We remember this in the context of our story, that would have strangers speaking the gift of life across language barriers, disciples on a mid-morning drunk, inebriated with the mystery of life emanating from them, and water dabbled on babies' heads and sprayed in your direction.

The verbs of Pentecost are yours today, breathe them in, and feel the gift of life coursing through your veins.

All this reminds me of a pivotal scene from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Baby Suggs is the matriarch of a slave family who has the gift of preaching. But to do so, she must slip into the woods, to a Clearing where she exhorts her people—men, women, and children—to breathe in the fullness of life that God had designed for them, even when fellow humans deny them that.

Morrison was writing primarily to Black people who bear the generational weight of her story, and so I share it here with some temerity, and only because I believe Morrison's timeless story is a sacred text that speaks a spirit-truth we all need to hear. And Baby Suggs is more than matriarch; she is, I

think, a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. So please hear her voice in that divine and wholistic context.

This is how Morrison unfurls the scene:<sup>iii</sup>

*"After situating herself on a huge flatsided rock, Baby Suggs bowed her head and prayed silently. The company watched her from the trees. They knew she was ready when she put her stick down. Then she shouted, "Let the children come!" and they ran from the trees toward her. "Let your mothers hear you laugh," she told them, and the woods rang. The adults looked on and could not help smiling. Then "Let the grown men come," she shouted. They stepped out one by one from among the ringing trees. "Let your wives and your children see you dance," she told them, and groundlife shuddered under their feet.*

*Finally she called the women to her. "Cry," she told them. "For the living and the dead. Just cry." And without covering their eyes the women let loose. It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart."*

The scene then turns to Baby Suggs exhorting them to love themselves—love their flesh,

their hands, their hearts, their wombs. Self-love is the grace they must claim. My friends, that grace, that liberating self-love is balm for the soul, it is the gift of the Spirit that dwells in every human being as dignifying spirit-truth.

Morrison closes the scene recentring Baby Suggs: *"Saying no more, she stood up then and danced with her twisted hip the rest of what*

*her heart had to say while the others opened their mouths and gave her the music. Long notes held until the four-part harmony was perfect enough for their deeply loved flesh."*

The Spirit dances and cries and laughs with you, in you, Beloved. Breathe that truth in, and celebrate your aliveness today as gift. For it is Pentecost. And we get the Spirit today. Remember this!

**Acts 2:1-21** *[When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples 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.'"]*

---

<sup>i</sup> <https://scpeanutgallery.files.wordpress.com/2017/06/pentecost-mosaic.jpg>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2018/11/10/spirit>

<sup>iii</sup> Excerpt cited at National Endowment of the Humanities,  
<https://edsitement.neh.gov/sites/default/files/resource/Beloved%20Activity%204%20Handout.pdf>