



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON NANCY ROSS, CANON FOR CATHEDRAL RELATIONS
THE DAY OF PENTECOST, MAY 31, 2020
ACTS 2:1-21; PSALM 104:25-35, 37; 1 CORINTHIANS 12:3b-13; JOHN 20:19-23

BLOW 'TIL I BE

John 20:19-23 [*When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "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 spent my adolescence at the folk mass, playing a guitar in my Holy Trinity school gym right next to the church where the “regular” mass was going on at the same time, 9:15 on Sunday mornings. I really liked the church mass better, because Holy Trinity is so beautiful with its marble altar with a carving of the Last Supper and giant stained-glass window of Jesus ascending into heaven on a cloud – and the elementary school gym, well, you know. It even smelled like a gym. But I had *yearned* to sing and play the guitar with the folk group at that folk mass.

And I had seen this little red guitar in the window of the Poughkeepsie Music Shop where I took piano lessons, and, Oh Lord, did my heart light on that red guitar. The color of FIRE. AHHH... It. Was. Beautiful. It stood

out with drama and power. My sweet parents bought it for me for Christmas, and as soon as I learned to play like four chords – C F D G – I could play almost every folk mass hymn, and I was in with my fiery red guitar!

One of my favorite folk mass hymns was not a shredder. It was called *Spirit of God*. That waltzy tune truly was one of the reasons I wanted to be in the folk group!

Blow, blow, blow 'til I be, but the breath of the Spirit, blowing in me.

The breath of the Spirit. Oh, I loved that image; it captured me. I know that imagery is pretty ubiquitous in Christian Holy Spirit-talk and literature, but it was a discovery to me at that time. I sang it to myself a lot and

was always overjoyed when it was one of the songs on Sunday.

In today's Gospel of John, the Spirit is breath. Jesus came into the locked room and said, "Peace be with you" and blew his breath on them: "Receive the Holy Spirit."

We don't always think of this *Gospel* reading as Pentecost, because we know the other story we read, from Acts of the Apostles, so well, and that story is DRAMATIC!

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.

And as much as this powerful scene is the story of Pentecost that fires up our imaginations like a red guitar – we still are more drawn, in prayer and literature, to that Spirit as ruach, breath.

The breath of the Spirit. This gift **is** peace and blessing. **And** it is violent wind and fire!

Because the breath **is** life! How well do we know this, during a pandemic that puts our loved ones on ventilators and has killed more than 100,000 people in this country that our leaders so blithely accept? The danger to our fundamental, sacred breath is all around us, even as so many disregard caring for each other and shun a simple mask, arguing that this breath that we take - it isn't *everything*!

Your breath isn't everything... until **you can't breathe**. How well do we know this, when just days ago another African-

American man, always another (!), George Floyd, pleaded, "I can't breathe" as he is murdered by the police?

We Christians DARE NOT talk about the Spirit as **breath** if we don't talk about "**I can't breathe**." Because Jesus didn't send the Spirit, did not breathe his own Spirit, just to fill their *hearts*. The filling of their hearts with the Spirit has a purpose: to SEND THEM FORTH! To send US forth!

In the Gospel of John, the risen Jesus comes through locked doors to frightened people and in breathing the Spirit says, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

In the Acts of the Apostles, the violent wind shakes the house and the tongues of fire come to rest on their heads and they are sent forth into the streets, evangelizing in other languages to the crowds gathered from every nation under heaven, it says! Because that's who the Spirit is here for. EVERYONE.

We are sent forth on Pentecost to speak a language that EVERYONE CAN UNDERSTAND, because we are sent to speak it in one breath, as one Spirit. *And what we are sent to speak is the message of love and salvation for EVERYONE through Jesus Christ!*

And so, Christians, I say again, we dare not come to celebrate the breath of the Spirit on Pentecost if we don't talk about "I can't breathe."

When our black brother's neck is crushed under a white knee, and he says, "I can't

breathe,” then Christians should be ignited, and united, to stand together and demand, “Stop killing black people!” – until people from every walk of life can hear it and understand and come together as one people. And those of us who are white need to say it not just with words, but with actions and with change in our own hearts, admitting to ourselves that even if we are without malice, we the need to face the seeds in ourselves of privilege and oppression and division that are part of our cultural inheritance.

When the Holy Spirit gave the gift of understanding languages, it was with fire – a vibrant sign – and suddenly they were ON fire. Out they went into the streets, no longer afraid of Rome, no longer worried that people might not understand, but so fired up with the Spirit that people couldn’t **help** but understand what they were saying!

And, friends, the Spirit never left! The Spirit was flowing through creation and is here with us now. We need to be fired up for Christ’s peace and justice and unity like it’s **Pentecost!** The Spirit continually renews the face of the Earth – and you and me. Are we ready to be renewed? Are we ready to join the work for change? Because the people pouring into the streets in Minneapolis – and New York and Atlanta and Los Angeles and Oakland and D.C. and Seattle – are!

In these isolating and fraught times, we are longing for old freedoms, but not everyone ever had those freedoms in the same measure, and still don’t. Back-to-normal looks an awful lot like murderous oppression to the

families of George Floyd, and Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor – and you know the names could just keep flowing, right?

If we are too busy longing for our old life, how can we be ready for what the Spirit brings anew? We aren’t called to go **back** to something. With the Spirit alighting on us with tongues of fire, we need to be transformed, and WE are the ones sent forth to bring change and renewal in the name of Jesus.

Look, we haven’t brought justice yet in all the history of this world, or in this nation. I know I haven’t done it enough in my own privileged life, even though I profess to and sincerely want to. It can feel impossible. But there is no impossible with the Spirit. So in these times, as all times, being a Christian is not just a sermon, not just words. It’s standing and acting for and with the oppressed, who, in this country, are people of color!

My friend Eli Moore, a dedicated community organizer, said, “[*Racism*] must be directly and consistently named, paid attention to, analyzed, organized against, directly confronted, and transformed at every level.” We have to “educate ourselves, to volunteer in organizations and movements, to make concrete contributions of our talents, treasure, and time... Join organizations led by people of color... We will not lead this work. But we will play a critical role when we contribute our life energy.”ⁱ

It's calling legislators and police departments; it's writing; it's showing up in solidarity – not violence; it's voting rights; it's speaking out about it with others; it's **listening**. This week I read again, “Just remember *sass* – S.A.S. – when you see a person of color being questioned or hassled, “Stop. Ask – if they're okay. Stay – be a witness.” STOP ASK STAY. S.A.S. And it's facing the racism in myself through reading, and conversation, and interaction and ACTION – and real inner work that changes what I do and what I'm oblivious to out in the world.

The writer Ally Henny posted: “*You can't say that you think that racism is wrong and then refuse to listen to the ideas of anti-racists that make you angry or uncomfortable.*”ⁱ

Because the Spirit didn't descend to make us comfortable! Transformation shakes us up! It's tongues-of-fire red! But in transforming us, the Spirit also empowers us! The Spirit holds us up when we're weak, pushes us forward when we're afraid, and, yes, asks us to do hard things – because Jesus DID – and we are followers of Jesus. No – more than that – we are the hands and feet of Jesus in the world!

And Jesus also breathes his peace on us.

So, we can be fired up for the mission – without incinerating everyone around us!
With the peace of the Holy Spirit blowing through your being – true love of God and love of neighbor in your heart – then even fired up with holy fire, we act in love. We listen with ears and hearts to truly hear each other.

Pentecost. The Spirit gives us the gift of understanding,

if we can only stop speaking past each other... and listen!

Spirit of God, creation is groaning.

*Fill the Earth, bring it to birth,
and blow where you will.*

Blow, blow, blow 'til I be,

but the Breath of the Spirit...

...transforming the world, through me. And you.

ⁱ Henny, Ally. 2020. “You can't say that you think that racism is wrong and then refuse to listen to the idea of anti-racists that make you angry or uncomfortable.” Facebook, May 28, 2020. https://www.facebook.com/allyhennypage/posts/1552243078259330?__tn__=-R.

ⁱⁱ Moore, Eli. 2020. “Dear white friends, we have to recognize the uncomfortable truth that we are the problem.” Facebook, May 30, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/eli.moore.14/posts/2996155747167440>.