

THE QUIET BREATH

John 20:19-23

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on Pentecost Sunday, May 28, 2023, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Scripture

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.’

In churches all over the world, today is called Pentecost Sunday. It is the Sunday each year we commemorate the gift of the Holy Spirit to the early church following the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is also in our country Memorial Day Weekend, a time which marks not only the traditional beginning of summer, but more importantly, our collective remembrance of people who have died in service to our nation. I want to bear witness to both of these in today’s sermon and service.

Let us pray: *Come Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove; come kindle the flame of sacred love, in these cold hearts of ours. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.*

I have shared with you before, at least in some of my classes, that when I was an intern in 1978-79, part of my work involved visiting Presbyterians who had come from small towns in Tennessee, Arkansas, and Mississippi, to have serious surgery or treatment in one of two major hospitals in Memphis. At one of them, Baptist Memorial Hospital, every Thursday I would go to the front desk, take a grey card file box, go to the tab labelled “Presbyterian,” jot the name and room number of every patient who had listed Presbyterian as their denomination, then starting at the 19th floor, work my way down, visit them on behalf of the Presbyterian Churches in Memphis.

I entered one room and there was a boy of about ten years old, asleep, recovering from surgery, the crown of his head wrapped in clean, white gauze. Two men were sitting on the windowsill by his bedside. I said: “I am Larry Hayward, a Presbyterian seminarian here to visit your family.” They jumped up in tandem and said: “We are his grandfather and father. We are both Pentecostal pastors.” I knew at that time that an errant “Pentecostal” card had found its way into the “Presbyterian” section, complicating my visit. But I wasn’t going to say, “Oh, I’m sorry, I got the wrong room.” So I offered to pray for the child, an offer they immediately accepted. I went over to the boy, placed my hand lightly on his forehead, and said my customary Presbyterian prayer, asking for God to use doctors and nurses, medicine and technology, for the boy’s best health and healing.

As soon as I started praying, the two men starting “speaking in tongues.” “Speaking in tongues” – or *glossolalia* in Greek – is a language of religious ecstasy that lies at the heart of Pentecostal faith. It is a language of prayer that neither the speaker nor hearers can understand, but it has the marks of a powerful religious experience.

I was only 23 at the time, and I knew what Pentecostalism was, but I had never been around it, at least in the intimate setting of a hospital room. I was nervous enough to end the prayer as quickly as I could. As soon as I said “Amen,” the two men stopped speaking. The silence was dramatic. We exchanged farewells, and I went on to the next patient on the next floor, who was in fact, to my great relief, Presbyterian. From then on, I checked the “Ps” in the card file ever more carefully.

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The ecstatic experience of the Holy Spirit was not part of my experience then nor has it been in the years since. It is parodied in our culture as backwards and unsophisticated, sometimes as if it is only one notch above “snake handling.” To be sure, many a charlatan preacher has “preyed on” rather than “prayed over” members of their congregation, attendees at their revivals, or contributors to their television ministries. Some have become corrupt and wealthy: Witness Jim and Tammye Faye Baaker¹; Jimmy Swaggart²; and, most recently, the founding pastors of Hillsong Church.³

But the Pentecostal experience itself – as divisive as it can sometimes be⁴ – is *legitimate*, as it was for the two men in the hospital room I visited. It is an expression and experience of Christian faith claimed by about 27% of Christians around the world,⁵ and is the fastest growing segment of Christianity.⁶ But it is different from the way most of us of Presbyterian stripe experience the Holy Spirit.

I.

In the Pentecost text before us today, from the Gospel of John, the disciples are gathered on Easter night, a few hours earlier having heard news of the resurrection from Mary Magdalene,⁷ but still not yet certain of it.⁸ They remain fearful of persecution by the same religious leaders who had lobbied for Jesus’ death. The risen Christ appears to them, shows them his hands and his side, and, as he had promised,⁹ gives them the Spirit. But this gift of the Spirit occurs not through loud and dramatic ecstasy, but through *a quiet breath*. Listen to John:

Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you” ...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.”

¹ Wikipedia, “Jim Bakker,” accessed May 27, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Bakker.

² Wikipedia, “Jimmy Swaggart,” accessed May 27, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jimmy_Swaggart.

³ Sophie Hanson, “Where Is Brian Houston Now? Hillsong Founder Resigned After Child Abuse Claims,” *Stylecaster*, May 19, 2023, <https://stylecaster.com/entertainment/tv-movies/1393763/brian-houston-now/>.

⁴ The Apostle Paul wrestled with the challenges of speaking in tongues (also known as “Glossolalia”) in the church at Corinth. See I Corinthians 14.

⁵ Conrad Hackett et al., “Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Christian Population,” *Pew Research Center*, December 2011, [https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2011/12/19/global-christianity-movements-and-denominations/#:~:text=\(For%20definitions%2C%20see%20Defining%20Christian,of%20the%20world's%20total%20population](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2011/12/19/global-christianity-movements-and-denominations/#:~:text=(For%20definitions%2C%20see%20Defining%20Christian,of%20the%20world's%20total%20population).

⁶ Wikipedia, “Christian Population Growth,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_population_growth#:~:text=sub%2DSaharan%20Africa,-.According%20to%20various%20scholars%20and%20sources%2C%20Pentecostalism%20is%20the%20fastest,%22Born%20again%22%20every%20day.

⁷ John 20:18.

⁸ John 20:20.

⁹ John 14:15-31.

When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

The disciples receive the Holy Spirit as *quiet breath*.

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Throughout the Old and New Testaments, the words “breath,” “wind,” and “spirit” are often intermixed.¹⁰

- In the Creation Story in Genesis, “when God created the heavens and the earth...a *wind* from God swept over the face of the waters.”¹¹
- In the next chapter, “when the Lord God formed [Adam – the first human being]...[God] breathed into [Adam’s] nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.”¹²
- Centuries later, when the people of Israel are in Exile, God leads the prophet Ezekiel through a valley of dry bones. God says to Ezekiel: “Prophecy to these bones, and say to them... Thus says the Lord God... I will cause *breath* to enter you and you shall live.” A few minutes later, after the bones have “rattled” and “come together” and been covered with “sinews” and “flesh” and “skin,” Ezekiel “prophesied as God had commanded [him], and *breath* came into [the bones], and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.”

Again: “breath”/“wind”/“spirit.”¹³

It is the same *quiet breath* given to the huddled disciples after the resurrection. These are beautiful narrations of the quiet breath, the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. We receive the Spirit through the quiet breath of beauty.

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Early in my ministry I struggled to find a quiet place to which to retreat for the actual writing of my sermons. This was particularly challenging in my church in Houston, where the church offices were close together and the walls thin. At one period, I began to drive to the library of Rice University. It was a long drive but worth it. I could seat myself at a carrel in the stacks, put worry aside, and write.

One day driving home, I stopped at Rothko Chapel, a small, modernist building amidst trees in a quiet neighborhood near downtown Houston. The chapel houses fourteen of Mark Rothko’s paintings of different hues of black against white walls. I entered the open, white room and sat on a bench opposite a large black painting. No one else was present. The room was perfectly quiet: quieter than the library from which I had just come, quieter than the Houston traffic from which I had just retreated.

I cannot say that I heard a voice. I cannot say that I felt a breath. But I felt a presence, a spirit, deeper than the ambiance of the room but similar to it in its noticeable quiet. I sat on the bench for several minutes, much longer than I usually sit anywhere. Then I stood up, returned to my car, and drove home through traffic. With an extra measure of peace. And I’ve never forgotten it.

II.

¹⁰ In Genesis 1, the Hebrew word is *ruach*, which is translated “breath,” “wind,” or “spirit.” In Genesis 2, the Hebrew word is *neshamah*, which leads the human being to being a *nephesh*, “living being.” In John 3:8, “spirit” and “wind” or interchangeable.

¹¹ Genesis 1:1-2.

¹² Genesis 2:7.

¹³ Ezekiel 32:1-10.

It is not only in the quiet breath of beauty that early disciples receive the Holy Spirit; it is also in the quiet breath of commission.

Dr. Gail O'Day, a Biblical commentator with whom I was privileged to study before her untimely death, points out that these earliest disciples are being commissioned to continue what God had sent Jesus to do. "As the Father has sent me," the risen Jesus says, "so I send you."

- These disciples, huddled in a room, receive the *breath* of God, and are *commissioned* to make God known to the world through Jesus Christ, that the world might choose light over darkness.
- They are *commissioned* to bear witness to the Spirit as the link between the historical ministry of Jesus and the future life of the church.
- In other words, they are *commissioned* – as a group, as a community, as what will become an institution – to continue the work of Christ into future generations.¹⁴

Hearing their commission, we realize that we are both the products of their commission and the inheritors of its responsibilities. We are the future generations about which Christ was concerned. And we are the ones charged today with continuing their commission. "I pray not only on behalf of these," Jesus had prayed to God prior to his death, "but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word...so that the world may believe that you have sent me."¹⁵ We inherit this commission.

Even though we may worry about the future of the church, the future of Christianity in the world and in our country, the antidote to our worry is to hear and remember that the quiet breath of the Spirit is infusing us to carry on in our generation. How can we help but respond to that commission?

III.

And finally, I am reminded on Memorial Day weekend that we can experience the Holy Spirit through *the quiet breath of sacrifice*: the sacrifice of Christ, the sacrifice of others, the sacrifice to which some of us in this room may be called.

In the past four weeks, I have, for the first time since before COVID, conducted services at Arlington National Cemetery: Two separate graveside services – a month apart – for two spouses who through their lengthy marriages had sacrificed much and received much in service to our country.

In between the two services, I returned to the Pentagon, again for the first time since before COVID, to participate in a promotion ceremony.

- Among the thirty or so gathered, I think I was the oldest person, even older than the parents of the person being promoted.
- I heard the story of the person being promoted; the stories of colleagues and friends in the military; the story of balancing spouse and children with such service.

¹⁴ Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John," *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IX* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 845-848.

¹⁵ John 17:20-21.

- I was escorted through the labyrinthian maze of tunnels and gardens by a Hispanic military officer – in charge of logistics for the service. He had grown up in the Bronx several decades after I was in seminary on the Upper West Side. As we walked, we compared stories from separate periods of Yankee dominance of major league baseball. When I asked him how he was led to serve in the military, he told me how he had entered ROTC in college and continued for nearly twenty years. He shared that it was both stressful and a point of pride for him to be serving in the building in which the branches of service are housed for the nation whose Constitution he has pledged to “support and defend.”
- Unrelated to these trips to Arlington Cemetery and the Pentagon, a few days later I heard a story of a member’s father, who as a child had fled on foot from one genocide in Europe, in which he had witnessed the capture of cousins, the death of a sibling, and the disappearing of parents. He ended up in this country, and served in a subsequent war defeating another genocide, after which he was able to receive an education, establish a family, build a life in this nation with a security he had never before known. Even up until his death, like many others, he rarely spoke of the atrocities he witnessed committed even against his own family.
- An hour or so after this conversation, I happened to read an intense statement of Christian pacifism from one of the leading theologians of our current generation.¹⁶ The statement was moving, powerful, provocative. It called for a different kind of sacrifice, which I understood to be true at one level, but which I knew I could not myself support in the fallen and cruel world in which we live. But I was also grateful that we live in a country, and worship in a denomination, which welcomes such variances of viewpoint on even something as significant as service in human warfare.

Writing all this for the closing section of this sermon, I came to realize that as I look at the rows of white headstones at Arlington, as I observe the crisp and beautiful ceremony that accompanies any service there, as I hear the salutes of any number of guns, fired fortunately into the sky with blanks, what I experience at that this national site is tragic awe: awe at the sacrifice of those buried in the soil beneath neatly etched stones, awe at the sacrifice of those they leave behind, and awe at the sheer human capacity for violence and evil which makes their sacrifice necessary.

But I am also reminded that whether the Holy Spirit comes to us in quiet breath or ecstatic speech; whether it comes in the language of prayer over the bedside of a grandchild, in the last breath of a comrade slain in battle or a family member lost to genocide, the Holy Spirit commissions us to bear witness to the presence of God in the world, to continue the work of the crucified, risen, and ascended Christ, by carrying on his name as members of the community he formed and commissioned for the purpose of being a blessing to all the nations of the world.¹⁷

In accepting this commission, we join centuries of people who have carried Christ’s name in the past and centuries more who will carry it in the future – in whatever form the church takes in Alexandria, Virginia, in Moi’s Bridge, Kenya, or in thousands of communities around the world.

These communities are filled with people both like us – and outwardly different from us – who have received the Spirit from the same *quiet breath* of God who commissions each of us to bear witness to Christ in the time and place in which we respectively live.

This is what the *quiet breath* leads us to do.

Amen.

¹⁶ John Inazu, “My Q&A with Theologian Stanley Hauerwas,” April 14, 2023, <https://johninazu.substack.com/p/my-q-and-a-with-theologian-stanley>.

¹⁷ Genesis 12:1-4.