

GETTING YOUR SECOND WIND

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Text: John 20:19-21

SCRIPTURE

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¹⁹ 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." ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

SERMON

One of my favorite books of all time is the *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis. Many of you might be familiar with this story but let me refresh your memory. Lewis introduces us to four children who find their way into a wondrous land through the back of a wardrobe closet in an uncle's house. The children, two boys and two girls, enter this magical land called Narnia, with its rolling hills, towering mountains, and rich, deep forests populated by the most remarkable beasts—all of whom can speak. However, they find the land covered with snow, cursed by perpetual winter.

We're also introduced to a wicked queen. She is a witch who is empowered with extraordinary gifts and has taken over the throne. She is the one who holds Narnia under her spell with her curse of perpetual winter. Lastly we're introduced to a lion. He's a mysterious, wondrous beast who comes from beyond Narnia and from beyond time. He's spoken of in hushed, reverent terms. In fact, when one of the girls asked a beaver, "Is this lion safe?" the beaver responded, "Safe? Oh my, no. But he's good."

This lion, Aslan, throughout the *Chronicles of Narnia*, is the Christ figure. He lays down his life for Narnia, dies on a stone table, and then rises from the dead more glorious and majestic than ever. In his majestic risen state, he proceeds to reverse the effects of the curse upon Narnia. Wherever he goes or leads his troops, the effects of the curse are reversed. You need not see him physically to know he is near. You know he is near because the trees begin to thaw and the crocuses bud and bloom, and the flowers begin to break through the surface of the snow. Toward the end of the story, Aslan leads a troop of liberators into the castle of the wicked queen and finds the courtyard filled with stone statues. These statues were once creatures, faithful Narnians, who had been turned to stone by the wicked queen. When Aslan comes into the castle he breaths life back into the statues and they are restored, giving them a second chance... a new life... a second wind.

Well, this morning we are talking about the second wind that was given to the disciples when Jesus granted them the gift of the Holy Spirit. Today we are celebrating Pentecost! Unlike Luke's account in Acts, which is the story we are most familiar with on Pentecost, where 40 days after Jesus' resurrection, the Spirit comes as a rush of violent wind, with tongues of fire and instant fluency in every foreign language...John's account happens just after the resurrection. Jesus has appeared to Mary Magdalene but the disciples had yet to see the risen Christ. So they were still scared, confused, and very much grief-stricken over the loss of their teacher and friend. They were in state of shock. The death of Jesus had taken away all their courage and hope. So they locked themselves in the upper room. And it is there, behind the locked door and locked windows, in a room filled with anxiety and fear, that the risen Jesus appears to them. At first his appearing only adds to their fear and confusion. But then Jesus says to them, "Peace be with you." And he gives them the gift he had been promising, he breathes the spirit of life into, not merely "on", his followers and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Now Howard and I have both talked about this word in Hebrew before, "ruah" which means wind, spirit or, in this text, breath. The very breath of Christ, that which was and is the life of Christ, is the life of the Holy Spirit. It was this same breath that first moved over the waters of chaos and brought order to creation...that brought human life to the world. It was this breath that moved over the valley filled with dried bones and restored life right in front of Ezekiel's eyes. It was the still small voice, in the breath, that Elijah hears God's voice.

The Holy Spirit – the breath of God – is a powerful and unpredictable force. But it isn't something we can see very easily. I had a hard time finding a cover for the bulletin for this Sunday because breath, air, wind isn't tangible, it isn't something we can hold in our hands. It reminds me of the story about the shark and the whale swimming around in the ocean. The shark says to his friend the whale, "You are so much older than I, and wiser too. Could you tell me where the ocean is?" The whale says, "Sure. The ocean is what you are in now." Of course, the shark doesn't believe it, "Come on, whale, I thought you were my friend. Tell me where the ocean is so I can find it!" The whale gently repeats what he's already said hundreds of times before, "The ocean is here, now; you are in it my friend." Still frustrated and unbelieving, the shark swims away searching for the ocean.

The Spirit is like the ocean. Although we cannot see it or touch it we are surrounded by the Spirit. Just as God's breath made the first creation, so likewise the breath of Jesus makes the new creation. Just as in the valley God breathed into the dry bones and gave life, so now in the moment of the new creation Jesus breathes his own Spirit into the disciples, giving them their second wind...new life.

And just like those disciples who didn't exactly know where the Spirit was going to lead them, we don't always know where or how the breath is moving us either. But Jesus does give us a clue. He says, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Now you might be thinking, "some clue that is right? So Jesus grants peace upon his scared followers. *Great!* Jesus fills them with the Holy Spirit. *Terrific!* But Jesus tells them they can forgive or retain other people's sins. *What is he asking?*"

Forgiving or retaining other people's sins is the kind of responsibility few, if any of us, would choose for ourselves. But a better translation of "forgive" is "set free" or "release." So Jesus is not appointing the church as some sort of moral watchdog and he does not mean for us to create a heavenly excel spread sheet of sins. You see, for John, when he talked about sin, he was referring to unbelief or the inability to understand the truth of God. So to sin was to remain estranged from God. So the resurrected Christ tells his followers, *all* his followers (and that includes us), that through the Spirit that enables us to bear witness, we can set people free from all that separates them from God. And in restoring right relationship with God, right relationship with community is also made whole. In receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit the church receives Jesus' own capacity to make God visible, bringing light to the world.

This is the important and awesome responsibility we have been given, to pass on the faith, to teach and to witness to one another of Christ's life-giving breath. The same Jesus who appeared to the disciples in that cramped, dark room and gave them new life, is the same Jesus who dwells within us, giving us a second wind, eager to enlist us to carry on his work of setting people free. We cannot possibly be good enough to take this on. We are a people who sometimes lock ourselves away; our feelings and emotions. Fear and anxiety has become a normal state of living for many of us. And the worrying is only increasing as bombs explode, people are harassed, fights break out and people are hurt and killed. We often feel as if the wind has been knocked out of us so how can Jesus be leaving this job to us?

Theologian and author, Barbara Brown Taylor, offers this about Pentecost and the Holy Spirit. "What happens between us when we come together to worship God is that the Holy Spirit swoops in and out among us, knitting us together through the songs we sing, the prayers we pray, the breaths we breathe. It can happen with two people and it can happen with two thousand people. It can scare us or comfort us, confuse us or clarify things for us, but," Taylor says, "as far as I can tell, the Holy Spirit never bullies us. We are always free to choose whether or how we will respond."

The path that the Spirit has set us on is a life-long journey. One that, like Taylor says, can reassure us or challenge us, one that can come as a soft breath or violent wind, but one that ultimately leads us here—here to a table where we are nourished by Jesus and reminded of what the Spirit can do through us. Like Aslan, bringing life back to Narnia, we need not see the Spirit to know it is there. Because wherever there is tragedy, there is also bravery. Wherever there are ordinary people in need, extraordinary ordinary people come to their aid. This is the work of the Spirit. It enables us to respond with love and grace. So take in a deep breath, breathe in the Spirit and receive your second wind and let us respond to the task of setting the world free. Thank God we do not do it alone.