

Sermon for Sunday, May 24, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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Today
we celebrate the feast of Pentecost,
fifty days
after
the Resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
It's the day when,
as we heard in our second reading,
the Holy Spirit came visibly and publicly on the disciples,
and what we know as the church
began.

Sometimes
people talk about the Feast of Pentecost as being the birthday
of the church.
Because what happened that day
as recorded in the book of Acts
is that what had been
a small group of Jews
meeting together quietly
and claiming Jesus Christ was risen
suddenly erupted
into something much bigger.
When the Holy Spirit came
in a rushing wind
and tongues of fire,
the disciples suddenly found themselves
proclaiming the gospel
in all sorts of languages,
opening the story of Jesus
to people far beyond their own little community,
far beyond
the promised land, the Holy Land,
to people from what are now
Iran and Iraq,
Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan,
Saudia Arabia, Yemen, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates,

Egypt, Sudan, and Libya,
Italy, and Greece,
perhaps even as far as Armenia and Georgia and Azerbaijan, Ethiopia and Eritrea and
Somalia.

Suddenly the gospel became something
not just the fulfillment of a messianic prophecy for the Jews,
but open to Europeans
and Arabs
and Africans.

All of them
heard the story of Jesus,
all of them heard
Peter preaching.
And many of them
were baptized.

In just a few hours, the church went from a hundred twenty or so,
to over three thousand!
And before long,
there were another five thousand.
No wonder people call it the birth day of the church.

Or was it?
Perhaps
it was the time
a few weeks earlier,
when the disciples
had headed back to Galilee,
when Jesus came to them and told them,
“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father
and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Perhaps that was when
the church was born.

Or was it earlier,
fifty days earlier,
when the disciples were hiding
in a locked room,
not even all of them, because we know

that Thomas was missing.
And they were terrified,
because they had just seen
their Lord and Savior crucified,
and there had been stories that he was risen,
but they just weren't sure.
And Jesus came to them,
and breathed on them,
and said,
"Receive the Holy Spirit."
Perhaps that was when
the church was born.

Or was it earlier that same day,
when Mary Magdalene went to the tomb
along with Joanna and Mary the mother of James,
and some other women,
and first saw
the risen Lord,
and ran and told the disciples.
We know
that on the night before he died,
Jesus spoke about the Spirit coming
when he was gone;
surely it was the Spirit
that gave them understanding,
surely it was the spirit
that gave them power to proclaim Christ's resurrection.
Perhaps it was then
that the church
was born.

And what all this points to
is that the work of the Holy Spirit can't be placed
into neat little boxes.
The work of the Spirit
forming the church
didn't begin at Pentecost,
but was already working
in the believers

making them ready
for that dramatic outpouring
at Pentecost.

But the work of the Spirit
is not just confined
to the church.
If the church lives because of the gift of God's spirit,
so too
does the world.

You see,
that's what our psalm today is all about.
It begins,
back before the section we read today,
the psalm begins by proclaiming
the glory of God.

“Bless the LORD, O my soul;
O LORD my God, how excellent is your greatness!
you are clothed with majesty and splendor.”

You wrap yourself with light as with a cloak
and spread out the heavens like a curtain.

You lay the beams of your chambers in the waters above;
you make the clouds your chariot;
you ride on the wings of the wind.

You make the winds your messengers
and flames of fire your servants.”

And the echoes, the echoes are here centuries earlier
of what will come at Pentecost,
the rushing wind
and fiery flames,
visible signs
of God's presence,
God's spirit.

But God is not just
in the rushing wind
and the fiery flames;
God's presence
is in everything

that has been created.
Because the psalm goes on
for another twenty verses
reciting the story of creation,
the creation of earth and sky,
sea and land,
sun and moon,
the creation of mountains and hills,
birds and beasts,
grass and plants.
And even human beings.

God is the one
in whom all things exist
and have their being.

And then we come to the part of the psalm we read today,
“O LORD, how manifold are your works! *
in wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.”
And then the psalmist moves to the sea,
the fish and corals,
plankton and whales,
the ships that skim its surface,
and even the Leviathan, the sea-monster of legend,
who is a plaything
for God.

All of these
depend on God.
They depend on God
for food.
They depend on God
for life.

Because, says the psalmist,
It is by God’s spirit that they are created,
and the word here for spirit
also means breath.
It is by God’s very breath

that the world is created,
God breathed
and the earth came
to life.

Now in case you're wondering,
this is not an argument, a claim
for creationism.
The psalmist has no interest
in demonstrating scientifically
how it is
our universe came into being.

The psalmist is speaking theologically,
the psalmist is talking of meaning.
We live in a world
that is God-breathed.
Without that breath,
the world would collapse into dust.

But with God,
dust
comes to life.

Remember the story of the creation of human beings
in the beginning of the book of Genesis”
“The Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils
the breath of life; and the man became a living being.”

And the story we heard
in our first reading,
the vision of Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones,
and God says to the bones,
“I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.”
And bone by bone, ligament by ligament, muscle by muscle,
the bones
come to life.

It's a foretaste
of the resurrection,

when we, with all those who have died in Christ
will have life breathed into us once more.

But it's not just something
we have to wait for
until after we die.
Because when God showed Ezekiel
that valley of dry bones,
he said to the people of God,
people who felt like
their life had been cut off,
that they were
just dusty old bones,
God said to them,
"I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live."

This is the breath of God,
the breath of God
that pervades our whole world,
the breath of God
that gives life to every living thing,
this breath
will come into our dusty, dry lives
and bring life again.

And that takes us back to the church.
Because sometimes
it feels like the church
is a little like those bones.
Dusty and dry,
and if you believe what some people say, close to death.

But no,
no,
God's spirit is here, here among us,
breathed into us
just as it was breathed into the disciples on Pentecost.
That's why the church is here,
two thousand years after Pentecost,
in spite of persecution and failure,

and yes, even sin,
in spite of all that,
we are still here,
because God keeps on
breathing life into our dusty old bones,

And we see it all around us.
In the faithfulness of parishioners
who have devoted their whole lives to this community.
In the children who keep demanding
we tell them
the stories of faith.
In the adults who find themselves,
sometimes almost unimaginably,
coming to new faith in Christ,
in the babies we baptize
like little Madison, who we baptize today.
And perhaps,
in you?