

Sermon Title: *The Spirit Breaks in*

John 20:19-23

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

Acts 2:1-12

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?’ ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.’ ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ ¹³But others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’

Happy belated birthday Church, as we approach 2,000 candles on our collective cake, we still have work to do. The official church year says that Pentecost was last Sunday, but since we are part of the Free Church tradition, we can celebrate it when we want! But it is too important a day to not remember, to not celebrate together.

There are traditionally two scriptures that are read on Pentecost – two stories of the coming of the Holy Spirit – two traditional birthday we remember, like your parents telling you the details about the day you were born. First, the coming of the Holy Spirit in the tongues of fire where everyone gathered could hear the *Good News* of God in their own language – a reversal of the Tower of Babel – all being able to hear in their native tongue. This is perhaps the clearest sign we could ever have that the Kingdom of God is for all the peoples of the world, that our God is for everyone, all can hear in their own language (not Greek, or Hebrew, or English or even King James English – but in their native language).

And the second passage of Pentecost, the second birth story we remember, is the one which we will focus more on this morning, Jesus comes to the frightened disciples in that locked room, commissions them, and breathes the Spirit of God upon them to empower them and go with them.

The gospel of John makes it clear that after the crucifixion of Jesus, the disciples were overcome with fear and despair. This sentiment was to be expected from a group of individuals who had followed a charismatic leader who they thought would lead them to a new world reality. Now, after Jesus' arrest and execution, those same disciples found themselves alone to deal with

the personal consequences for themselves, the religious-political and real-life consequences of Jesus' work and ministry. They went from believing in the historical project that Jesus would establish the Kingdom on earth, to now fearing that all that was lost – fearing for their own lives and safety. Perhaps fearing that they have wasted the last three years of their life – what have they been doing? Why did they leave their secure job and income? Why had they not at least encouraged Jesus to tone it down, or tried to keep him out of Jerusalem? Now it is over. So they thought. So they huddled together in fear. Fear for their lives. Fear for those they had met along the way. Fear of being exposed. Fear they had wasted these past years. Behind locked doors in fear.

Fear is a strange and interesting thing – fear changes what we see and what we perceive.

One of the stories I love to hear Jenna tell is about fear...fear and snakes (she said I could share this).

One of the mountain bike trails near our house is Polecat. And in the heat of the summer, as with many of our foothills trails, you sometimes come around a corner to meet a snake sunning themselves on the trail. I had just ridden this trail a few days before and met three or four snakes – knowing this, Jenna was on high snake alert.

Sure enough, she comes around a corner early on her ride. There is a snake. She met this snake like we meet people in a narrow hallway – she moved right and so did the snake, she moved left, and so did the snake. Till eventually it slithered off. She thinks, “okay, good – I got my snake encounter out of the way early, now I can enjoy the rest of my ride.”

But, not so fast. A little bit later, she comes around the corner to meet a large snake on the path, and with no time to react, rolls over it.

Now, she is on full snake alert, she comes around another corner, and just a few feet away is another snake right next to the trail. Though this snake is raised up a bit, like it is ready to strike. Seeing it in time, and still being a few feet away, she stops and gets off the bike. She waits a bit, but the snake won't move. She has to get to work, so she does not enough time to turn around and go back the way she came. She throws a rock near it, to try and scare it off. It still won't move. A few minutes later, a guy comes with a dog comes by. She tells him about the situation. He says he will check it out, slowly. He approaches it with his dog, nice and easy. Then, as he gets close, he bends down and picks up the snake. Finding that it is just a stick.

This is what fear can do to us so often, causes us to see the thing we fear the most. Causes us to see a snake where there is only a stick. Fear often causes us to see what is not there. Fear can paralyze us from moving forward. Fear can often cause us to see the worst possible option, to see what we fear. Fear can cause us to see a simple mistake as intent; it can cause us to take offense when none is meant; it can cause us to see an enemy, when there is really just difference or misunderstanding; it can cause us to build walls and buy more guns instead of looking for the root causes or simply getting to know our neighbor. Fear can keep us behind locked doors. Fear can cause us to see a snake when it is only a stick.

And Jesus comes to these fearful friends whom he loves. He comes because, as Walter Brueggemann says, "he has four things he needs to say to them. Four things only he can say.

They are things that, once said to us, can never be unsaid.”¹ Four reminders from Pentecost, four remembrances from our birth story, which have decisively changed the life of the church. On this day we remember Pentecost, we remember our birth.

Jesus’ first word is to meet them in their fear, “**Peace be with you.**” That is the first word of the powerful Christ to a fearful church. To be sure, the phrase is a Jewish greeting. If Jesus had come to us, he might have said, “Hey – everything’s ok.” But he didn’t. He said, “Peace.” This word on the lips of Jesus is a powerful word, claiming the space, setting the agenda, and redefining their reality. “Peace” is a lordly word spoken to us, against fear and uncertainty of our life and all we hear.

The first reminder of our birthday story is peace. To our fear. To our uncertainty. To our tears. Peace.

Second, Jesus says, “**As God has sent me, so I send you.**” Jesus does not simply return to the disciples to celebrate his resurrection and have a party, but to prepare them as he sent them forth to continue the work he had begun. The coming of Jesus is not just a nice presence, *it is a mission*. When the Holy Spirit enters into the book of *Acts* the disciples and forming church explode into mission: creating energy and imagination, resolve and courage, conflict and love,

¹ Walter Brueggemann offers this Pentecost perspective in “The Ultimate Gate Crasher” in *The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann*, p.33-36. Brueggemann presents these four assertions in this sermon; all quotes in the coming section come from this sermon.

and passion *that the world should know an alternative* to how things are – that alternative is the new life in Jesus Christ. The sent church is busy turning the world right-side up.

Walter Brueggemann says, “The problem with the fearful church is that it thinks it is not any longer sent. It has become an end in itself, a resting place, an achievement” a place for people to come and be and stay. “So here we all are, safe, well-fed, comfortable.” Brueggemann says that “all of that, however, is countered by the single word of the risen Jesus, “I send you.”

Jesus is sending all of his disciples who share his life to the neighbor in need. This is of course an odd notion in our affluent consumerism, where we imagine we are an end in ourselves. In the presence of Jesus, however, we become aware that we are a means to God’s longer end.

This is the second thing we remember in this birthday story, we are sent. There is a mission to join with. There is work to do. Just as Jesus was sent, so are we sent.

Third, Jesus says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

Holy Spirit talk among us is tricky, because there are so many freaky and strange suggestions that go with this. Taken most simply, the Holy Spirit refers to the energizing power from God that moves us beyond ourselves, to take actions, to dare dreams, to run risks, and to move beyond the locked doors which hold us secure in our fear. The assurance of Jesus is that the wind of God will blow us in courage, in spite of our weariness and fearfulness.

It is a beautiful thing that Jesus promised the coming of the Spirit, right after he said, “I send you,” otherwise we might have had our list of excuses ready to go. God knows this about us. And so Jesus promised us a helper, and advocate – one to go before us – one to move in us, and through us, and with us. *If we can remember just one moment when the Spirit of God*

touched our lives: when we felt something Holy we could not explain, when we had courage we usually lack, when we had the right words at the right moment, a coincidence we could not explain, when we felt a stirring to speak-up, or an idea that could have only come from God, or when someone had the right words for us at just the right moment – if we can remember this, then of course we know that if it happened once before, it can happen again.

The wind is blowing. This is the third thing we remember from the story of our birth, that we have received the Holy Spirit – that God’s Spirit is on the loose.

And fourth, Jesus says finally: **“If you forgive sins, they are forgiven. If you refuse to forgive, they are retained”**. We are sent in power with the business, the *single primal business*, of forgiveness. Forgiveness is what the world both craves and fears. The world cannot commit forgiveness for itself, cannot forgive itself. Forgiveness must come from the large heart of God, enacted in the world.

So Jesus gives the church this fresh work. To forgive is to break the vicious cycles of death through this fresh act of generosity and grace. Forgiveness *is a decision to begin at a different place*. Without forgiveness, the world works its way to death and destructiveness, generation after generation. The curse of unforgiveness leads to abuse and dehumanization, to despair and brutality, to violence upon violence. It makes some rich and powerful, while others are exploited and end finally in crime and in poverty. Families play this same game of unforgiveness, generation after generation. Families end in abuse; communities end in hostility and suspicion. Nations play the game of unforgiveness, and it leads to repression and inequality,

to walls and war and terror. Unforgiveness leads to death, both for the victim and for the perpetrator.

This final remembrance from our birth story, says Walter Brueggemann, is “not just that God forgives, but that God has created a people to have as its main, single business in the world the forgiveness of sins, the cancellation of debts, the breaking of the power of fear and hate and death, in order to start again.”

Into our fear, the Spirit of God breaks in. To our lives and world of fear, let us remember the story of our birth, dear church:

Peace.

I send you.

Receive the Holy Spirit.

If you forgive, it is forgiven. If you refuse, they are retained.

May we remember who we are – it is who we have always been since our very birth – that healing and hope might flow through us and into the world. Amen and amen.