

John 20:19-23

Day of Pentecost

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Welcome to our digital worship service on this Day of Pentecost. This was the hardest sermon I've had to preach yet, and I hope that y'all will hold on with me until the end. Take a deep breath with me and let's get started.

(deep breath in and out)

Pentecost is usually a day of celebration. We all match each other by wearing our different shades of red, we hang the fiery red banners in the church, and some leaders even start fires in their baptismal fonts which burn throughout the service.

This is the day we celebrate the Holy Spirit's descent onto the disciples and into the world. We remember the familiar story from Acts chapter 2 where the apostles are in the upper room not long after Jesus' ascension. Many people from many nations were all visiting Jerusalem and they were nearby. All of the sudden, from heaven, comes the sound like the rush of a violent wind. Divided tongues as of fire appeared among the apostles, and they all began speaking in different languages.

I always thought this was one of the greatest examples of unity through diversity in the Bible. Instead of having all of the people in Jerusalem understand the disciples' native tongue, God reached out to all people in their own native languages through the power of the Holy Spirit. There was no need for assimilation from the different nationalities present, because God reached beyond the boundaries of language and proclaimed God's mighty deeds of power!

But this year we aren't together. This year I didn't start a fire in my kitchen for you to celebrate Pentecost. This year I'm not even wearing red.

This year in the midst of this global pandemic, nothing is the same. As of this weekend 100,000 Americans have died from COVID-19. Coronavirus, a disease that attacks our most vulnerable people through their respiratory systems causing coughing, choking, and the need for breathing machines, coronavirus takes away its victim's breath.

This is the very same breath that was breathed into the adam – the earth creature – after God molded his body out of the earth in the book of Genesis. This very same breath is God's breath, God's spirit, which flows in and through us and all of creation. It's the same breath we took together at the beginning of the sermon. We are all intricately connected through this breath.

And this year, because of the virus, we've learned just how much more connected we are. Even though we've been sheltering in our homes for a couple of months now, God is doing a new thing in our church, outside of the boundaries of our worship traditions, just like God did a new thing back on that day of Pentecost with speaking in tongues.

At the start of this week I began gathering my thoughts about the message God was giving me for this weekend and the Day of Pentecost, still thinking COVID-19 was going to be the news topic of conversation.

I decided I was going to preach the John text and not the Acts text. Y'all know how much I love the gospel of John, and John's Pentecost story is a bit different than the story in Acts. The Johannine Pentecost is actually Easter Sunday. Jesus literally *blows* the Holy Spirit onto the disciples with his breath after he enters the room. He says to them, "Peace be with you."

Peace be with you.

When I thought about preaching a text where Jesus blows the Spirit of God into the disciples, I thought I was going to be preaching about the lives we lost to COVID-19. I thought I was going to be preaching about how the presence of the Holy Spirit gives us peace...

And then came Amy Cooper and Christian Cooper. Then came George Floyd. Then came Sha'Teina Grady El from right here in Washtenaw County. And suddenly, COVID-19 wasn't the only thing that was taking the breath from God's beloved.

This spirit of God that offers us peace in John also offers us the fires of justice and prophetic witness in Acts. It ignites flames that catch throughout the world.

The sin of racism and white supremacy has been choking our siblings of color in and out of the church since before we called this sin by name. And Tuesday morning as I watched the videos of George Floyd's last moments surface on the internet, I knew I had to reexamine my plan for Pentecost Sunday.

I watched with tears as a police officer had his knee in Mr. Floyd's neck, compromising his airway. The very *breath* of God that flowed through his body was being cut off. I watched and I listened as he said, "I can't breathe," to the police officer over and over again until he took his last *breath*.

I want to share a picture of George Floyd with you. He was a loving man, known for doing anything for anyone. Known for diffusing difficult situations. Known for creating baptismal fonts in the back yard on his street so that people who walked by could be resurrected into the newness of life that Jesus Christ offers us. He was known for loving our Creator. He's the one holding the Bible in this picture.

(show pictures)

I look at George Floyd's pictures and perhaps my favorite is the one of him holding his daughter. And I think, another black man robbed of his *breath* at the hands of a system that was built to enslave him, and never reformed quite enough to set him free.

I look at George Floyd's pictures and I read the words of Jesus from our lesson today – Peace be with you.

And still, all I hear is a cry from Malcolm X who in his Prospects for Freedom speech in 1965 says, "You can't separate peace from freedom because no one can be at peace unless he has his freedom."

— *"Prospects for Freedom in 1965," speech, Jan. 7 1965, New York City (published in Malcolm X Speaks, ch. 12, 1965)*

How do people of color, and for that matter how do we as their white siblings in Christ, have peace when people are crying out that they are not free or safe in this country?

Jesus said peace be with you, but our systems of injustice are robbing people of that peace that he gives us.

The week we celebrate the very breath and spirit of God blowing over all of creation, the week we celebrate the message of God's radical love and inclusion spreading like wind and fire among *all* the nations, is the *same* week we watched a man of God robbed from his freedom and his breath at the hands of the same type of state sanctioned violence that killed our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

We may not be worshipping in our buildings this Day of Pentecost 2020 but God sure as heck is showing up in the fires of Holy Outrage at the death of God's beloved child. **Fires of rioting** remind me of God's righteous anger blowing over the Hebrew Bible as God's people were enslaved and killed over and over again. The images of these fires remind of the Holy Spirit that Day of Pentecost, spreading throughout the world like fire. God is showing up and God is angry at the sin of racism, at the sin of murder. And this anger is spreading like fire.

We know our God is God of justice. And God the Holy Spirit is doing new and different things through our new and different circumstances. We have noticed this here at St. Mark through the technology we are using to stay connected with each other and to reach out to our community.

This is the same technology that is allowing us to connect with our siblings all across the country in this time of crisis. It's the technology that allows us to financially support the efforts of the Lutheran churches that are open in Minneapolis, helping to provide medical care to those who have been tear gassed by police. It's the same technology that helps us to amplify the voices that are at the center of this oppression.

And in an attempt to center voices of the oppressed, I am going to share a portion of Reverend Tiffany Chaney's most recent reflection. where she was asked by churchwide to share a reflection from her heart. Rev. Chaney is a mission developer in Alabama and the Associate Director for African Descent Ministries for the ELCA.

Rev. Chaney writes,

"Today, I am sick and tired of being sick and tired.

I am sick and tired of watching Black women and men die because of their Black skin. I'm sick and tired of watching videos like that of George Floyd, where for 9 minutes, he had a knee to his neck, where the full weight of grown men crushed his body in the street.

I am sick and tired of the white people who use police as a weapon when they don't get their way. I am sick and tired of the police officers who choose to prove they are a weapon against Black bodies.

I am sick and tired of people rediscovering racism every time a hashtag or murderous video gets enough social media attention.

I am sick and tired of respectability advocacy. Let's face it, the reason the Amy Cooper video got as much attention as it did was because there was a dog being visibly abused in the video. If there had not been, would it have gotten as much attention? And, then, soon after we get credible credentials on Christian Copper: Harvard graduate, bird watcher, former Marvel Comics editor, member of the board of directors for the New York City chapter of the Audubon Society. I'm sick and tired of someone having to be respectable to white standards to be worthy of attention or justice.

I am sick and tired of Black women being erased from the story. The silence around Breonna Taylor's murder in her bed in Kentucky is deafening.

I am sick and tired of the language distinctions around who is a protestor and who is a rioter. We have watched for weeks as armed white people entered state capitol buildings. For days on end, they were not met with tear gas or the national guard. But, within hours, the people in Minneapolis calling for life and justice, were greeted in this way."

Later she says,

"I am sick and tired of Pentecost celebrations that celebrate language but do not share struggle.

We all know this Pentecost text and we also know the story of the new church that follows. We know the Holy Spirit showed up, changing the lives of the people in the room. The winds of change stirred the people in the room that day but it did not just stir them to stay where they were, among themselves. It blew them out into the world around them.

What happens when the Spirit moves and we are able to hear the language of people around us? The Holy Spirit is with us today, still burning like a hot flame and blowing like wind, opening our ears to hear and understand the people around us.

What's the use of hearing each other's language if it does not change us?"

Rev. Chaney's question makes me wonder whether or not we really understand who this Jesus guy was that we follow. Do we understand how radical it was that Jesus' followers dropped their entire lives to go with him? How radical it was that the lives of every person he encountered changed dramatically?

Our God is in the business of liberating. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection liberates us from the ultimate bondage of sin. But until that day comes, we still live in a world full of the consequences of our sin. Our sin is racism. And one of those consequences is that some of our siblings in Christ, our siblings of color, are not able to breathe. The very breath of God that should flow through them is extinguished through systems of violence that have been in place for centuries.

Remember at the beginning of my sermon when I had us take a deep breath together? I want us to do it again. Ready?

(Breathe)

Let us never forget those whose breath has been taken from them. Let us invite the Holy Spirit to blow throughout our lives in whatever way necessary for us to continue to do God's work of loving our neighbors and bearing one another's burdens. As the prophet Amos said, let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

<https://revtifc.wordpress.com/2020/05/29/sick-and-tired-of-being-sick-and-tired/>

*Rev. Tiffany Chaney's reflection*