

Pentecost Sunday

May 27, 2012

An old tradition says that St. Luke was not only a physician but an artist. In his description of the first Pentecost in the first reading from Acts, he describes the coming of the Holy Spirit on the infant church with the images of tongues of fire parting and then resting on each of the disciples gathered in the upper room. Luke's story is easy to follow and easy to see.

Besides Luke's vivid story of the first Pentecost we also hear today John's version where Jesus shows his disciples his hands and his side and then breathes on them so that they could catch his Spirit. It is a reminder that Jesus not only died on the cross, but he handed over his Spirit to the church. We can picture the hands and the side, but a breath or gush of wind is not something you see but something you feel.

In the Bible, wondrous things began to happen when people felt God's breath. God formed the first creature from the clay of the earth, but life came only when he felt God blowing into his nostrils. In Ezekiel's time, people had become an old bone yard until that great day when "dem dry bones" felt God's spirit bring them back to life.

It was only when Elizabeth felt the Holy Spirit that she was able to cry out in a loud voice to Mary: "Rejoice, O highly favored daughter! The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women." And even though Jesus had just been baptized by John and was filled with the Holy Spirit, instead of going out to preach and heal Jesus felt the Spirit drive him into the desert where he was tested. The Spirit blows wherever it wants.

And so the more you think about it, maybe Pentecost is not so much a feast to see but a feast to feel. I don't mean feeling in any gushy, sentimental sense but feeling in terms of prayer of the heart which can unravel our tangled thoughts so that we can breathe with God's Spirit.

In many spiritual traditions, people learn to pray and meditate by becoming aware of their own breathing. It's odd, isn't it, that we breathe all the time but rarely are aware of it except in those terrifying moments when a piece of food goes down the "wrong pipe." We then gasp for air. We suddenly realize how precious is the gift of breath.

There is one old ritual in some parts of Umbria and Tuscany that is still celebrated on Pentecost. People climb hilltops and mountains early in the morning of this day to pray. They call this custom "catching the Holy Spirit." It is a ritual that says that the gifts of the Holy Spirit can only be "caught" in deep prayer.

If you get a chance today, go climb a mountain or even a little hill or just go outside and breathe deeply. Feel the breath of Jesus in you. Despite all the scars on the earth, the church, ourselves, feel how the Spirit of God still continues to breathe life into all of creation and to renew our own drooping spirits. Feel the Spirit of God move not just in expected places like church, but feel the Spirit of God move wherever it wants in surprising places and ways. And after you catch God's Spirit, go give it away!

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