

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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Catching Our Breath

Acts 2 – Pentecost

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I rarely jog because when I do I have to stop to catch my breath. The elevator is always a welcomed mode of transportation over multiple flights of stairs, for at every landing, I usually have to stop to catch my breath. As you know, we like adventure and the great outdoors – hiking, waterskiing, snow skiing – but what hinders me from showing much improvement has nothing to do with ability or strength or talent. It is a lung issue, pure and simple. I always need to stop and take a break to catch my breath. Often you'll find me pulling up the rear in such activities – not because I like to take my time and soak in all of life as I am moving through it, but because – yes, you guessed it – I'm simply catching my breath. It is the speed at which our world runs these days – the frantic, frenetic, frenzied pace in which our culture moves – that has many of us making our way through our days with tongues hanging out, and we end each day feeling more spent than energized by the living of the gift of that day. And sometimes this occurs not from the physical strain of the day's work and activities, but from an emotional phenomenon as well. Sometimes even when we are getting plenty of rest and aren't physically over-exerting ourselves, we are emotionally drained – worn out from the grief or the loneliness or the dysfunction in which we live. In those cases our chest feels so heavy that we can't even take the deep breath to catch.

And along comes Pentecost as one of God's best gifts to us. Today is a day to catch our breath - for the Spirit of God is blowing through here today. Actually, the Spirit blows through every day, but on Pentecost we are called to stand up and take notice. I was struck by something new in this familiar text today. I tried to picture what it must have been like for this gathered group in Jerusalem. Pentecost was "one of the three most important Jewish festivals, along with Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles . . . it came to be designated Pentecost ("fiftieth") because it was celebrated on the fiftieth day after the sabbath on which Passover began. In Christian practice, Pentecost occurred fifty days after Easter." (Preaching Through the Christian Year, Year A, Carl R. Holladay, page 293) So Jews from the whole region had gathered in Jerusalem for this festive religious and spiritual occasion. And to their great surprise, they began to hear one another in their own language. Now that had never happened before. They were quite used to gathering in Jerusalem to culminate their religious pilgrimages during peak festival season, but they were not quite used to hearing their own languages being spoken. Marcus Borg says that "Jews in Jerusalem from the many different countries and language groups of the Jewish diaspora understood, each in their own language, what the followers of Jesus were saying . . . Rather than being unintelligible speech [like the *speaking in tongues* that Paul refers to], it was supremely intelligible . . . For the author of Luke-Acts, the coming of Jesus and the continuation of his presence in the power of the Spirit inaugurated a new age in which the fragmentation of humanity was overcome." (Seeing the Bible Again, "Pentecost and Babble/Babel," beliefnet.com, Marcus Borg)

And so here is my new thought: they were all speaking different languages, yet understanding everything that was said because they heard it in their own language. They

were talking and listening and understanding – they were communicating in a situation that sounds like it should have been nothing but chaotic. Today, in our little corner of the world, we all speak the same language yet often don't understand what pours forth from the mouth of another. Can somebody explain this to me? The irony has kept me perplexed and a little worried. We are all talking and supposedly listening, but we are frequently not communicating. Perhaps it's because instead of listening, we are formulating what we are going to say next. Perhaps it's because we are so self-absorbed that we can't turn our attention to another. Perhaps it's because we live in a sound-byte culture, or because we're so busy, or because our own lives are crumbling apart, or because we are too on the go, or because we are looking forward to completing the next task, or looking backward and pining for what was, or because we are running at a break-neck pace, or because we are too insecure to enter the dialogue, or, or, or – I could go on and on about why it is that we speak the same language and yet do not understand one another. But the lesson to be learned on this Day of Pentecost is that God said *I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh and your sons and daughters shall prophesy . . . and see visions . . . and dream dreams.* (Acts 2) And on that day way back when – it didn't matter the language barrier – they understood one another.

It's time we catch our breath. It is the gift of Pentecost that God's Spirit blows through here like an oxygen mask that drops from the airplane's ceiling. Just in time, before we crash, Pentecost drops in and allows us to breathe deeply the richness of God's goodness and grace, and we can breathe again. And here is my only "Mother's Day" word: let me advise us all – adults, secure your own oxygen mask before attempting to assist your children. How can our children experience the life of faith if we ourselves are

not practicing it? Jan Richardson says that "the celebration of Pentecost beckons us to keep breathing. It challenges us to keep ourselves open to the Spirit who seeks us. The Spirit that, in the beginning, brooded over the chaos and brought forth creation; the Spirit that drenched the community with fire and breath on the day of Pentecost: this same Spirit desires to dwell within us and among us. Amidst the brokenness and chaos and pain that sometimes come with being in community, the Spirit searches for places to breathe in us, to transform us, to knit us together more deeply and wholly as the body of Christ, and to send us forth into the world." (The Painted Prayerbook, Word & Image & Faith, Jan Richardson, 2008.)

Our world needs to catch its breath. From war to cyclones, from poverty and homelessness and famine to the gross wealth of a few, from our economy and cost of filling up our cars to presidential hopefuls who spew slander and let it masquerade as debate, from school shootings to Darfur to torture - - - our world needs Pentecost to catch its breath.

Our city needs to catch its breath. From racial divisions that still prevail way too much to at risk schools in our own backyard while my children two miles away receive the finest education possible, from a community known as "the Bank" where money is a key to this Queen city to gangs and slum lords on Tuskaseegee Road in the same Queen city, from families who find themselves at our doorstep and call it home to multiple shelters that are filled to overflowing each and every night - - - our city needs Pentecost to catch its breath.

Our church needs to catch its breath. From Vision Teams to Capital Campaign committees, from budget worries to Building Committees - - - our church needs Pentecost to catch its breath.

And then there's us – Beloved Children of God – who are spent and overworked and overcommitted – from soccer moms to corporate execs, from caring for aging parents while juggling toddlers on our hips, from divorce to grief, from loneliness to guilt - - - we need Pentecost to catch our breath.

But Pentecost is not of our own doing. I heard someone say once that “they didn't do Lent” – meaning they didn't observe the practice of giving up something to symbolize the sacrifice of Christ – as if they could choose whether or not Lent happened by their participation, or lack thereof, in it. The season of Lent will come whether we observe it or not. The same with Pentecost. The Spirit blows through here like the wind and it dances over our heads like flames of fire, and we can't stop that. But we can choose not to notice it. For all the reasons I listed earlier plus 10,000 more – we choose to don our windbreakers and our fire hoses – so that the wind and fire of God can't get to us.

I believe that the world and our city and our church – and we – often choose not to take notice God's presence among us and within us. And that is more than just unfortunate. I would be bold enough to call that Sin. Pentecost (this day of worship) is a time to catch our breath - but it is the breath of the Spirit that we are really catching, and it is alive and well even when we are not experiencing it ourselves.

So for today – take a deep breath. Go ahead. Literally. Take a deep breath. Now look at these flames that dance before us on this table. Really look at them for they are a

reminder to us that God dances. Now hear this good word: God said *I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh*. May it be so.