

“God Breathed Scripture”

(Acts 2:1-24)

This last week, Ethan came home all excited from the library, and burst through the door with a huge smile on his face and a book of kid's jokes in his hand. We sat down and started going through the book. And so I read him this joke -- why did the elephant not buy the Porsche? Answer: not enough trunk space and all God's people groaned. As I read punch lines to him, often with an accompanying gentle nudge, Ethan would politely smirk or let out a little laugh, but I think he was just humoring me. Reading joke after joke, I realized many were really plays on words that were difficult for him to wrap his six year old mind around. Now, we are surrounded by words, sometimes that make sense and sometimes that don't. Some words are powerful enough to cause us to be embarrassed or other words awaken anger and we can literally feel our face become flush with warmth. But honestly, like those jokes I was telling Ethan, a lot of words that we encounter in our daily life enter our ears and escape quickly before even registering. We hear without really listening. Whether the words come from family or friends or radio or television or conversations overheard, there are moments each day when the consonants and sounds we hear flutter in and fly away barely leaving a trace.

But there are words that can jar us, cause us to stop in our tracks, and pay attention. It was the kinds of words that have the power to bring you to a stand-still that rode the fragile air waves toward ears on the very first Pentecost Sunday. There is a familiarity to this scene. The disciples gathered in a room more than likely observing the festival of Pentecost within the Jewish tradition, which is fifty days after Passover and marks when the spring barley is harvested. In the midst of that celebration suddenly, they heard a sound like the wind. Wind blows throughout the pages of scripture, recall the Spirit surfing over the watery chaos in the Genesis 1 or the whirlwind on the mountain when Elijah ran for his life from the queen who wanted his head or remember at the end of Luke's gospel the last words Jesus said to his disciples were wait until they were clothed with power from on high. Usually within our active imaginations we hear this image of wind, we take a creative leap and think that the room where they were sitting must have suddenly become like a scene out of the movie *Twister*, tables spinning, chairs upended, chaos, right? What I've often missed is that Acts doesn't say that, **just that they heard** this sound like the wind; which could have been more disorienting than actually feeling or being caught up in a swirling, whirling wind. If you've ever heard a rushing sound through some speakers, but your skin remains untouched, it's unnerving. You start to look around and feel uneasy. Part of the reason why we might miss this detail is that the first Pentecost does not allow any one image to linger too long. Soon, divided tongues appear, poof, out of thin air and they start speaking to each other.

As they do this, the cacophony of words seeps out of the space, spills out onto the street where those passing by stop. Words caused people to stand still. This is Jerusalem, a city, a densely populated city. A city with lots of voices, lots of words clogging the air waves, you pass by any house and you caught snippets of conversations muddled with the words of those walking next to you. Words surrounded you. So, was it just because as people walked past they heard a variety of words, different languages that made them pause? That might be amusing enough. But, this is Jerusalem, a cosmopolitan city, a gathering place for travelers and foreigners at a festive time when people brought the first fruits of the barley to the temple as an offering. Maybe hearing different languages was not all that remarkable. One possible reason that made people stop, stand still, amazed and bewildered was they understood. Or as Michael Williams puts it, the real miracle is not the spectacle of speaking in tongues, but the ability to hear and understand¹. Imagine living in a place where the native language is not what you grew up speaking, the language of your home was not what you heard around you regularly. And then, one day, wandering down the street, you hear **your**

¹ The Storyteller's Companion to the Bible, Dennis Smith and Michael Williams, ed., pg. 32

language, that which was familiar, words you knew and words you could understand. All of a sudden, you are caught up in a rush of emotion, memories of your childhood flood your mind, you are momentarily transported from the reality of the city to the place of your home. People heard words that cut close to their hearts, words of profound truth, and words of testimony of God's presence that caused goose bumps as they stood there listening and truly hearing.

The first Pentecost in some ways is repeated every single time we gather to worship. We travel here to this set apart place. And as we enter into worship what we are really doing is weaving together words. Some words are said, some are sung, some sudden stir in the silence spaces in-between. We are awash in words, some that seem unrecognizable or even unruly; in a way like a gathering where people spoke different languages but understood each other. And for all the words spoken in this sanctuary, the ones to which we are invited to listen closest to, pay attention to, sit and linger with are the words of scripture. The first Pentecost is repeated every single time we gather to worship because we center ourselves on the **words of scripture that are God-breathed**.

As I've begun to prepare for my first weeks of my doctorate program, I've been asked to consider my own understanding of scripture. And what I found myself coming back to as one answer that made some sense to my head and heart was scripture being God-breathed. Or better yet, God *spired*, (everyone say spired with me) a Latin word that meant breath, it's found in words like *inspire* or *conspire*; which can mean simply breathe together. When we hear the words of scripture we breathe in God's presence, we come in contact with a wisdom that challenges us and engages us in a way that other words might not. Scripture as God *spired* reminds us that the Bible is living and interacts with us. To breathe in scripture invites us to be immersed in a mystery of words that are not wholly reliant on only our rational minds. Now, to be sure, there are parts of scripture we might rather not breathe in. There are words that might feel like a smoggy day in L.A. Words that speak of violence attributed to God, words that condone treating people as less than fully created in God's loving image. There are words that frustrate us, words that don't make sense to us.

Some of those who were wandering past the chaos of Pentecost might have also been frustrated by what they heard. Acts is even brave enough to tell us at least some in the crowd say the whole thing is a result of a barley festival of a different sort. But others say, how can this be, how can we hear this? Which is quickly followed by the second question, what does this all mean? Friends, the first Pentecost is repeated each Sunday with these questions as well. We breathe in scripture, we encounter God's presence through words that have been read and re-read for generations. And then, you hear my prayerful attempt to answer those ancient two questions first uttered on Pentecost: what are we hearing? And why does it matter? Or abbreviated to twitter form, what and so what?

To breathe in scripture leaves us longing to hear some response to these two questions, which friends is not all that different than what Peter does on the first Pentecost and we repeat each Sunday. Peter raises his voice, reads from the Hebrew Scripture and connects what is happening with Christ's presence. These words prayerfully stand in that tradition. These words seek to weave together our faith in Christ with the realities we bring through the act of breathing in scripture. One way to breathe in scripture is to do so together and to be open, like on the first Pentecost, to the stirring of the Spirit. I might not care to breathe in the words about violence, but when we do perhaps we can begin to name and confess the violence that exists in our world today, that we do to each other, sometimes still in the name of God. I might not care to breathe in words about how women were treated in both testaments, but when we do perhaps we can begin to name and confess how we as a church still struggle with fully embracing women as ministers and leaders. When we don't breathe in scripture that challenges us, or frustrates us, or pushes us, we create a faith that is too

comfortable and status quo. Or one of my favorite quotes I've run across puts it, "Whenever we read the Bible put it down and say, "just as I thought" we are in trouble!"²

On this Pentecost Sunday, I pray we will keep open to the Spirit that invites us to breathe in each Sunday the wisdom and life giving truth of God found in scripture. I pray we will find ways to listen to the words of scripture with an openness and alertness that is different than when we are listening to radio, that when we step inside the church, the words we utter here would sound and feel and be different. Most of all, I pray that as a church we will keep finding ways to breathe in scripture, letting it roam around and elicit our response that we share with others. Scripture is God breathed, words spoken that still have the power to stop us in our tracks and awaken us to the sacred. May it be so today and throughout this season of Pentecost.

Thanks be to God and all God's people said, "Amen"

² The Art of Reading Scripture, pg. 16