

The Breath of God

St. Mark Lutheran
Pentecost

Pastor Ken Welsh
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When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. Acts 2:1-4

There was a missionary overseas by the name of Herbert Jackson. Missionaries often face special problems and Herbert Jackson had one. He was given a car for his ministry, but it wouldn't start without a push. He would park on a hill and get a group of kids or a couple of adults to give it a push downhill so that the car would start. He did this for two years.

At the end of the two years, he needed to return to the U.S. because of health problems. A new missionary came to replace him and the car went with the job. Herb explained about the car's problem, but the new missionary knew all about cars. He found a loose cable, fastened it, stepped into the car and it started right up. The power was available all along.

Some Christians are similar to Herb Jackson. They have a power that is available to them, but they don't understand much about how to connect. God's Word tells us that something exceptional is within each Christian. Shortly after the miracle on the day of Pentecost, the Apostle Peter addressed the People of Israel and said this, "Repent and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38)

The Holy Spirit is a marvelous power in our lives. And yet, the Scriptures do not tell us a lot about him. There are more passages that deal with the Father and the Son. Some disciples in Ephesus told Paul that they had not even heard that there was a Holy Spirit. So Paul baptized them and they received him. (Acts 19:2)

One concept many people have trouble understanding is that the Holy Spirit is a person in the Trinity and thus is properly referred to as "he" and not "it". Back in 2003, World Magazine reported that they did a study of people who referred to themselves as being "born again". Yet among those people, a little more than half (52%) referred to the Holy Spirit as "it". Even in some theological circles, there are those that have trouble accepting that the Holy Spirit is a person.

So let's look again at what Jesus said as recorded in John 14: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you." Jesus clearly indicates that the Holy Spirit given to us is referred to as "he".

Other passages in the Scriptures ascribe feelings and character to the Holy Spirit that only a person would have. He speaks to us in 1 Timothy 4:1; he teaches us in John 14:26; he guides us in John 16:13; he can be grieved by our actions in Eph. 4:30; he can be lied to in Acts 5:3; he can be resisted in Acts 7:51. He is a person of the Holy Trinity and he is inside of us.

Now other people have no problem believing that the Holy Spirit lives within us, but they often do not understand what the Holy Spirit does. What did Jesus tell the disciples after his resurrection? Acts 1 tells us that he instructed the disciples to remain in Jerusalem where they were going to receive a gift from God. Jesus is quoted in Acts 1:8 as saying, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Now the disciples had already received the Holy Spirit into their lives. One example is revealed in John 20:22 which relates, "And with that he (Jesus) breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'" That's where I got my title "The Breath of God". But the disciples did not seem to be very aware of what the Holy Spirit could do. Many of the things Jesus said to them were not clearly understood until later on.

That brings us to Acts 2 this morning and the fulfilment on the day of Pentecost of what Jesus said in Acts 1. The "breath of God" was really loud this time. We are told a sound came from heaven like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Then divided tongues of fire rested on each one of them. They did not just have the Holy Spirit, they were "filled" with the Holy Spirit, and he gave them the gift to speak in other tongues or languages. Peter used this occasion to explain to the people that what they had seen and heard was God in action, and that the Holy Spirit had been poured out among them, and that this Jesus whom they had crucified was both Lord and Christ. The Holy Spirit convinced people through the words they heard. We are told that about three thousand of them were baptized into Christ at that time.

The power that the Holy Spirit brought to the disciples that day is available to us now. What Jesus said to the disciples about the Holy Spirit, he says to us today. "You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you." (John 14:17b) The Scriptures are very clear. The Holy Spirit is in Christians. He has many gifts that he can give. (See I Corinthians 12) He gives them according to His will.

There are churches and individuals who believe that God is still using the gift of speaking in unknown languages today. They are called "charismatic" churches or groups. Our churches do not teach that. We have not seen any evidence that proves to us that this is so. We don't deny that the Holy Spirit could give that gift again should he need to use it.

Rather than focusing on the gift, we believe we should focus on the purpose of the gift. What was the purpose? The purpose was clearly to bring the Word of God to others so that they might believe in Jesus and be forgiven of their sins. We do that as a church. We have an excellent group called Lutheran Bible Translators which translates the Bible into many languages so that others may read and hear the Word of God and the message of salvation in their own language. By God's grace, this organization has translated the New Testament into thirty-six different languages and fifty-one language groups. They are working on another 22 language groups, spiritually impacting the lives of millions of people.

But that does not relieve us of our individual responsibility to speak to others in a language we and they know well-English. What Jesus said to his disciples, "You shall be witnesses unto me..." he says to us also. A witness gives testimony about things that are known. We don't convince others-that's the Holy Spirit's job-but he is in us to help us and works through the Word of God when we have courage enough to share it. In a sense, Pentecost is still going on, and let us not forget that we have an important part in it. Amen.

