

John 20:19-23

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

I have been comparing and contrasting images from the news from Minneapolis this week with the images we find in today's readings.

*"Divided tongues, as of **fire**, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them."*

(Acts 2:3)

*"Minneapolis in on **fire**."*

(Headline, Slate.com)

*"When he had said this, he **breathed** on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'"*

(John 20:22)

*"I can't **breathe**."*

(Eric Garner, 2014; George Floyd, 2020)

Images of fire and death have been haunting me this week. The other night the 3rd Precinct Police Station was set on fire, among other things and buildings. The fires made for striking video footage of the protests and violence in Minneapolis that night. And the image of the Minneapolis police officer with his knee on the neck of George Floyd as he repeatedly says, "I can't breathe," has been keeping me up at night.

We are living in a time of great grief these days. First, the COVID19 grief of everyone having their lives put on hold or turned upside down; then the grief over the senseless death of yet another black man by the hands of law enforcement. It is often more than I know what to do with...

And yet, it is Pentecost. So let us begin there and then reenter the world of grief we live in.

This year I noticed certain images in both the Acts and the John versions of “Pentecost”/coming of the Holy Spirit.

In the account of Pentecost in Acts, there are four things that happen when the Spirit shows up.

1. “a sound like the rush of a violent **wind**”
2. “Divided tongues, as of **fire**...rested on each of them”
3. “They were **filled** with the Holy Spirit”
4. “and they began to **speak** in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”

In the Johannine “Pentecost”, we are given one more image: **breath**.

In Acts we see the disciples all “gathered in one place,” when suddenly there was “a sound like the rush of a violent wind” that filled the entire house where they were sitting. Then, “divided tongues, as of fire...rested on each of them.” All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to do. Because of the wind of the Holy Spirit, the disciples were, indeed, clothed with power from God and were now equipped to be witnesses to Jesus, proclaiming the message of repentance and forgiveness in his name.

It is a coming together – in spite of (or because of) Peter’s frank assessment of the situation, “*you crucified and killed {Jesus} by the hands of those outside the law.*” Even though all those who gathered in Jerusalem were there for the celebration of Shavuot and shared a common faith, they couldn’t have been more different. They were what is known as the diaspora: the Jews scattered across the world ever since the exile to Babylon. They were from different countries, came from different cultures and spoke different languages. They were as diverse a group as you could find, save their shared tradition and God.

But when the Spirit comes in power and fills the disciples, the many become one. Barriers are broken down and all heard the saving message in all its power in their own mother-tongues. Three thousand repented and were baptized that day. A powerful coming together, indeed.

The image of fire and wind is one that evokes the image of a wildfire. Given an ample supply of fuel and oxygen, fire always spreads. And one of the things that helps it spread is wind. I found a brief explanation of this phenomenon on Auburn.edu:

Wind increases the supply of oxygen, which results in the fire burning more rapidly. It also removes the surface fuel moisture, which increases the drying of the fuel. Air pressure will push flames, sparks and firebrands into new fuel. ... High winds will cause the head of a fire to move ahead rapidly.

And this is exactly what happened that day in Jerusalem. In spite of (or because) of Peter’s blunt honesty, calling out their sin, hearts were softened and people changed their

minds (i.e. repented) about Jesus and about the nature of reality. They were brought together in love by this fire and this wind.

But when the fire of justice long deferred burns within the heart of a nation and especially within the hearts of the descendants of those were brought in shackles to live as slaves to their white “masters,” this fire is a dangerous thing. Fueled further by the wind out of the white house and other sources of misinformation and hatred, these fires – both literal and figurative – have raged in Minneapolis and several other cities across the U.S.

And if you want to see a powerful image of White Privilege, look no further than the images of the “Liberate” movement, where angry white people – many carrying firearms – protested at the Minnesota state capital building in St. Paul. Notice that not a shot was fired, not one injury was reported. Law enforcement stood down as the President tweeted about what “good people” these were.

Then look at the images of the protests in the same metropolis after the killing of George Floyd. Look at the response of law enforcement personnel to these two protests, one almost exclusively by white people, the other predominantly black people. And notice that the one in the Oval Office tweeted about these protesters as “thugs.” You can bet your bottom dollar that if it had been black people carrying firearms at the state capital, trying to “liberate” the state, rivers of blood would have flowed. This is white privilege. This is the gap between justice for whites and for blacks.

The difference between these two protests and the response of the government to them is striking. The system works much better and much more favorably for one of these groups than the other.

As a cis white male, I cannot even imagine how different my life would be if the color of my skin had been much darker. I can no more imagine how it would feel to be an African American person in this country any more than I can imagine conceiving and giving birth to a child. I’ve seen the latter one happen in person three times, but I did not carry that child within my body nor did I push it out into the world.

I can no more imagine what it is like to be an African American. I have not been there. I have seen some of it, but I do not have the personal experience to say one word on what their would feels like.

Pastor Regina Hassanally, Bishop of the Southeastern Minnesota synod, wrote yesterday,

I know as a white woman with a certain amount of privilege, how easy it can be to dismiss something as untrue because it reflects truth that is uncomfortable or outside my experience. So, I’m asking us to listen and to believe the words our

siblings of color speak even when those words are hard to hear or tell us of a world we know nothing about. Listen.

May the Holy Spirit give me the ears to hear.

The phrase that has been haunting me this week more than any other, however, are the words spoken by George Floyd while the police officer's knee was on his neck, "I can't breathe." These are the very words spoken by another black man while being choked by a police officer in 2014. Eleven times Eric Garner spoke these words before he died in Los Angeles after being confronted for selling a pack of cigarettes without a license.

Parker Palmer writes about this phrase, "I can't breathe":

"I CAN'T BREATHE." Those words give voice to the terror that has haunted black Americans since the founding of this country. They can also serve as a tragic tag for a political-cultural era in which life has been choked out of so many and so much.

- "I can't breathe" were the dying words of a black man named George Floyd, as a police officer kept a knee on his neck for nearly nine minutes, while Floyd lay handcuffed on the ground. They are words that thousands of lynching victims in this country might have said as they died, words that freedom-seekers now living in limbo south of our border could say as they watch their dreams and sometimes their children die. All of this is rooted in the racism that American "leaders" have long exploited as a path to power, to which too many whites have given silent assent.
- "I can't breathe" might have been the dying words of the 100,000 + American victims of COVID-19 just before they were intubated, deaths that have hit communities of color the hardest. Fewer would have died if our "leaders" valued science above ideology, human life above money and power, and the public interest above their own. Their knees were pressed down on those throats.
- "I can't breathe" represents a challenge to the moral credentials of white people—if we fail to speak and act against the racist forces that help fuel #45's war on democracy. Some of us have been "gasping for breath" since the birtherism huckster ran for president, polluting the air we breathe with his racism and his taste for fascism.

In the wake of a horrifying week in America, what can we do? If you or I walked down the street and heard a stranger say, "I can't breathe," we'd dial 911. We'd stay with the stranger until help arrived and do anything we could, the Heimlich maneuver, or CPR, or a hand to hold. We would NOT walk on by as if nothing

were happening. Please, let's not walk by now. And let's not indulge the self-serving delusion that there's nothing we can do.

Please do not let your hearts be hardened by all of this. Instead, let them break into a million pieces. Psalm 51 tells us that *"the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."* We do not have the luxury of anger, unless that anger leads us to just actions on behalf of those in need of justice. But a broken and contrite heart, God will not despise.

"I can't breathe": the words spoken by those who have lived under the yoke of oppression for too long.

But we are the ones into whom Jesus breathed the breath of life. Just as Adam was a lifeless lump of clay before God breathed into his nostrils, so we are the new creation in Christ, given the same Spirit Jesus spoke of in his inaugural sermon in Nazareth:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

While we listen to our sisters and brothers of color, may we also support them in seeking the year of the Lord's favor at last.

Amen.