

Texts: Numbers 11:24-30; Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; Acts 2:1-21; John 20:19-23

The way Luke tells the story, it happened on the feast of Shavuot, a harvest festival that takes place 50 days after Passover. The way Luke tells it, Jerusalem was crowded with immigrants from all over the known world. The way Luke tells it, about 120 men and women, Jesus' followers, had been waiting and praying for what Jesus had promised them when he appeared to them after his resurrection: John baptized with water, he said, but you will be baptized by the Holy Spirit, not many days from now. (Acts 1:5) The way Luke tells it, a gale force wind blew through the house, and tongues of flame rested on each of them. The way Luke tells it, all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages.

That's not the way John tells the story. The way John tells it, it was evening on that first day of the week, the day when the women and then Peter and John had found an empty tomb. The way John tells it, Jesus appeared to the disciples behind closed and locked doors. The way John tells it, the risen Jesus breathed on the disciples, blew the Holy Spirit into their noses and mouths with God's own breath. The way John tells it, the risen Jesus gave them his peace, sent them out as he himself had been sent, and gave them the power to forgive sins.

So which story is it?

There are many Christians who insist that the Bible is a simple book and all we have to do is to follow its instructions. But it's not so simple. When was the Holy Spirit given to the disciples? Was it on the feast of Pentecost, 50 days after Jesus' resurrection, as Luke tells it? Or was it on that very same night? Was it tongues of fire and a violent wind or

was it Jesus' words and breath? What is this Holy Spirit anyway and how are her gifts given?

Today is the 50th day after Easter. That is what the word "Pentecost" means. Today is the day when we celebrate the work of the Holy Spirit, the day when we celebrate her surprising and empowering work among us and in each of our lives. And yes, I do call the Holy Spirit "she" – both the Hebrew word "ruach" and the Greek word "pneuma" are grammatically feminine nouns in those languages. The Holy Spirit is God, part of the Holy Trinity. She is the breath that hovered over the waters at the moment of creation. She is the spark of life that brought Jesus into being in Mary's womb. She is the presence of God that lives in your heart and connects you to the universe. She is the breath of all life.

This morning's psalm celebrates the diversity of life on this planet – all of it created and loved by God, all of it alive and renewed in the cycle of seasons. The way the Psalmist tells it, God's wisdom and creativity can be found in every living thing. Every living thing participates in the Spirit of the living God.

And this morning's Old Testament reading celebrates God's Spirit as well. The way the writer of Numbers tells the story, God's people have been wandering in the wilderness and they are getting testy. They are whining constantly about how great it was back in Egypt and how horrible the conditions are in the desert. So Moses asks God for help. God tells Moses to choose 70 elders from among the people and God promises to give each one some of the same Spirit that rests on Moses. In this way, they will be empowered to assist with leading God's people. Let me just say right here – no pastor, no leader, can do it all. Leadership is a shared duty, and it is the Spirit that gives each one of us the gifts to share

that duty. God's Spirit rests on each one of those 70 elders, so that they can help bear the burden of leadership.

But there is a problem – two of the elders, Eldad and Medad, aren't with the others out at the tabernacle. They are still in the camp when the Spirit comes upon them. Joshua, Moses' assistant, is incensed. "Stop them!" he cries out. "They can't do that here."

The way the writer of Numbers tells it, God's Spirit cannot be limited. Those two men begin to prophecy, to speak God's word, not in God's sanctuary, but right there in the middle of the camp and no one can stop them. In fact, Moses lets Joshua and everyone know that he wishes it would happen to everyone. "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets," he says. Why not?

What all these Holy Spirit stories have in common is this: God's Spirit cannot be contained. God's Spirit rests on anyone it chooses. When the Spirit grabs you, look out.

God's Spirit is breath – you can't speak without breathing. You can't live without breathing. God's Spirit is fire – you burn with holy passion. God's Spirit is light – with it you can see the way God sees.

The Holy Spirit gives the gift of speech. The way Numbers tells it, Eldad and Medad prophesied in the camp. The way Luke tells it, the disciples in the upper room found themselves able to speak in other languages. The way John tells it, the disciples were sent out from Jesus' presence with the ability to speak God's peace and to speak God's forgiveness.

The gift of the Spirit is poured out on all people. The way Luke tells it, Peter quotes the prophet Joel: I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters

shall prophesy...even upon slaves both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit and they will prophesy.

The Holy Spirit pours out in abundance. This is no stingy gift meted out in little spoonfuls. The Holy Spirit is God's generosity, God's inspiration, God's overwhelming richness. The Holy Spirit is poured out on everyone.

I want to say something about the word prophecy, because that is part of the story of the Holy Spirit. And we have an unfortunate tendency to water down that word. We tend to think of it only as the ability to tell the future. That is not what prophecy means in the Bible. Prophecy means to tell the truth – Gods' truth. Prophecy speaks truth to power. Prophecy speaks from a place on the margin. Prophecy does not commend the status quo. Prophecy is a game-changer. Prophecy pushes the edge of the envelope.

We need the Holy Spirit's gift of prophecy more than ever. Much of our political conversation in these past few weeks reveals a view of the world that claims that there is no longer any "global community" but only an arena where nations and businesses engage and compete for advantage. A view of the world that claims that competition is superior to cooperation. A view of the world that claims that life is a hostile struggle for gain. A view of the world that claims that altruism and trust are unaffordable luxuries, that the greatest value is self-interest. A view of the world that claims that the deal-makers, the strongmen and those who know how to wield power wind up on top and that those who cannot keep up do not deserve any protection.

That is not God's view. The God that we worship and serve created every living thing on this planet, breathed the breath of life into every living thing and loves everything that he created. The God we worship and serve pours out the Holy Spirit and gives its gifts

to everyone. The God we worship and serve seeks out the lost and the abandoned, searches for one sheep out of a hundred, one coin out of ten and rejoices with the angels when that one is found. The God we worship and serve leaves no one behind. The God we worship and serve is profligate and generous, a God of abundance. There is no room in God for scarcity and competition. The God we worship and serve gave it all away, dying on a cross for the life of the world.

I'm going to demonstrate what I mean. Here are the candles that we usually light on Christmas Eve. Today we are going to light them again. And we are going to see that the gift of the Holy Spirit is not diminished by sharing its light. When you light another candle, the light is doubled, not cut in half. The Holy Spirit gathers and connects, inspires and loves, creates and gives life. Hold these candles high as we sing...

May the wind of the Holy Spirit blow through your being. May the fire of the Holy Spirit kindle your passion. May the gifts of the Holy Spirit enable you to speak, to love, to connect. May the power of the Holy Spirit bring you to life everlasting.