

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Kim Jackson

Gospel Reading: John 20:19-31

8 April 2018



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 because they were afraid, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then after showing them the holes in his hands and feet, Jesus does this very strange thing: He breathes on them. Seriously, y'all, it's an odd thing for a grown man to do a group people: like a kid at a birthday party trying to blow out candles, Jesus breathes on them!

And then, to clarify things, with his next breath Jesus says to the disciples, "Receive the Holy Spirit," because by receiving the Holy Spirit you will have the capacity to bring forgiveness to a broken people. Jesus tells his friends that by receiving the Holy Spirit, they will have this incredible power to bring healing and peace to the world.

I wish that Jesus had followed that up with letting them know that even with the Holy Spirit — that even with God on their side — changing the world wasn't going to be easy.

It's the benefit of hindsight and the historical record that tells us just how hard the work of sharing a message peace and forgiveness truly is.

Those disciples that Jesus breathed upon (well, for the sake of the children in the room), let's just say they had a really rough go at it!

Living with the power of the Holy Spirit within them was hard, and for some, it was downright deadly. They weren't well-received by most of society because their message was too radical and too countercultural. The disciples had a hard time making friends because they were doing an odd and strange thing: sharing a radical message about a God who loves us so much that that God became human, willingly suffered a gruesome death, and then had the power and audacity to come back to life and call people to a new life of freedom, justice and peace.

For the people surrounding the disciples, talking about God in that way, suggesting that Jesus was more than a mere man and instead a liberator: well friends, that concept — the concept that Jesus was more than a mere man — was even weirder than a grown man breathing on a group of people!

And my siblings in Christ, I've got news for you. We, too, are invited and indeed called, to do a strange thing. That message from the disciples — that message of a freedom-giving, justice-making and peace-loving God, that message, is the message that we as followers of Christ are also called to share. And the thing about it is that even today, almost 2000 years later, that message remains just as radical and countercultural as it was when Jesus first shared the Holy Spirit with his followers.

Our message of a justice-loving, peace-making, and liberating God sounds strange, because we live in a world that has become accustomed to violence and suffering as a part of life. Tim talked about this on Good Friday in his sermon: the movies that we love, the shows that we binge, the video games we play, all too often revel in violence and oppression, instead of peace and freedom.

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Our Public School Systems continue to advantage the children of white and wealthy people, while ever expanding the educational gap between children of color and their white peers... But, friends we've grown accustomed to this injustice.

We've gotten comfortable with hundreds of years of gender inequality. It's normal in this society for "boys to be boys," for women to make less than men and for non-gendering conforming people to be left without a seat at the table. ...And we've grown accustomed to this injustice.

People living under bridges and on Church stoops, children sleeping in cars, and college students breaking into abandoned buildings in order to find shelter... We drive by people like this everyday, and my siblings in Christ, we've grown accustomed to this injustice.

My friends, as a society-at-large, we've grown accustomed to war and not peace, to oppression and not liberation, to revenge and never justice.

So, when God invites us to share a message of liberation and peace, when the Holy Spirit burns within us a message of love and justice — it sounds so strange.

As we commemorate the 50th anniversary of Saint Martin Luther King, Jr.'s martyrdom, I turn to his words for guidance.

In a speech at Western Michigan University Doctor King invited people of good-will to grow unaccustomed to evil in society, and instead become maladjusted. Of himself he said:

"I say very honestly that I never intend to become adjusted to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to become adjusted to religious bigotry. I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. I never intend to adjust myself to the madness of militarism, to self-defeating effects of physical violence..."

Friends, this is the invitation. This is what it means to be a follower of Christ: we are called to be maladjusted in a world that gorges on violence, bigotry, and discrimination. We are called to make peace and justice the customs of our communities. As we participate in the creation of God's Beloved Community, we are called to make love and freedom our bedrock.

I know that this all sounds like incredibly difficult work. And that's because it is. But, just like the disciples, Jesus has breathed the Holy Spirit upon us too. So we do this work, not by ourselves, but with the power of the Holy Spirit.

I'll end with this story:

The Hebrew scriptures contain a fantastic story about a man named Ezekiel. In a time of great despair when the young were dying or already dead, there were victims of war, neglect and his people roamed without a home. Everywhere he looked, there was great desolation, violence and suffering. Ezekiel saw so much despair that the only metaphor apt to describe what he saw, was to say that he stood among a valley of dry bones.

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As he stood there, the voice of God spoke out and said, “Ezekiel, can these bones live?” And perhaps a bit tongue in cheek, Ezekiel retorted, “Maybe, Lord God only you know.”¹ So then God told Ezekiel to start talking. Start telling the Truth — start telling the people that there is a new way to be in the world. Start prophesying to the people that despite how challenging and difficult it may seem,

There is HOPE.

And so the great prophet spoke to the victims of war and oppression, and he called out to the rulers and people in power. As Ezekiel spoke out about the possibility of a new world where children no longer hungered and refugees had safe harbor As he spoke about the impossible — a place where people study war no more — the earth trembled and quaked as desolation and despair gave way to new life.

But that’s not all, my friends. Ezekiel then summoned the four winds — and the Spirit of God breathed life into those desolate places! Like grey clouds blowing away to be replaced with clear blue skies, the Spirit of God moved and created a new world.

Siblings in Christ, God does miraculous things through the breath of life that abides within us all.

It was the breath of God that inspired Martin Luther King, Jr. to lead the Poor People’s Campaign, to stand on the steps of Lincoln Memorial and tell the Truth about the possibilities of a new world.

It was that same breath of the Holy Spirit that gave former rectors at All Saints’ the courage to open up this pulpit to people of color, women, and members of LGBTQ community during a time in which others said not to.

And it was that same breath of God that inspired the creation of our Refugee Ministry, Covenant Community, MAC and Threads.

That same breath that Christ breathed on his disciples is the same breath lives in you and me. That same spirit inspires us all. So friends, powered by the Holy Spirit, let us go out into the world and proclaim a message of love, freedom and peace for all of God’s children! Amen.

¹ Ezekiel 37:3.