

THE BREATH OF GOD

ACTS 2:1-21; ROMANS 8:22-27; JOHN 15:26-27; 16:4B-15; EZEKIEL 37:1-14

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

BY: RYAN DUECK

MAY 24, 2015/PENTECOST SUNDAY

As we have already heard, today is Pentecost Sunday. The day the church celebrates the descent of the Holy Spirit, and the birth of the church.

We don't always find it easy to talk about the Holy Spirit as Anabaptists, do we?

Perhaps we associate the Holy Spirit with "other Christians" who worship in wild and charismatic ways.

Perhaps we think of emotion-drenched expressions of piety instead of the more cerebral and buttoned down forms that we prefer.

Perhaps we think of the Holy Spirit as something for the super-spiritual Christians who do things (or *claim* to do things) that less "Spirit-filled" Christians cannot do.

We're not always sure what to make of the Holy Spirit.

Many of you know that my brother Gil taught at the about-to-close Bethany College in Saskatchewan.

One of the things I most enjoyed about Gil teaching at Bethany was exam-marking season, when he would send me some of the more "entertaining" answers that his students would sometimes come up with.

A few weeks ago, he texted me this one:

I believe that the Holy Spirit also has strong ability to take over a person or give them ability that can only be described as divine. These can be things such as

superhuman strength, ability to part waters, ability to transform an object into another, or healing ability.

It's easy to laugh, isn't it? Sounds kind of like spiritual kryptonite!

But I wonder how far from the truth this is when it comes to many popular understandings of the Holy Spirit, inside and outside the church.

God the Father, we get.

Jesus we get.

But the Spirit? Well, we're not always so sure.

We have heard excerpts of four texts in our readers' theatre this morning. Maybe you recognized a few references.

We didn't hear the entire passages, but I want to make a few comments about what each text referred to in the reading reveals about the Spirit's work in the world, and then close with a story.

Ezekiel 37:1-14

The OT text was Ezekiel 37:1-14, and probably the most famous passage in the book.

In it, the Spirit leads the prophet into a vision of a valley of dry bones that represent the desolation that has come upon his people.

The Spirit asks Ezekiel if these bones can live. The prophet responds, "You alone know this, O God.

The image that follows is perhaps one of the most enduring in all of Scripture—the Spirit of God breathing life into the dry bones, the bones coming together, taking on flesh, and coming alive.

From Ezekiel we learn that the Spirit is the breath of God who longs to breathe life into dry bones, bones that are weary with long histories of sin and suffering, bones that see no hope or future, bones that represent death and sadness and pain.

The Spirit's job, in Ezekiel, is to breathe life into what seems to be dead.

John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

The second text that was referred to in the readers' theatre comes from Jesus' farewell discourse in the gospel of John. He has told the disciples that he will be leaving them and that they cannot follow where he is going.

In this context, Jesus promises that the Father will send an "advocate" to help them and to be with them forever (John 15:16).

Jesus calls him the Spirit of Truth. And the Spirit will tell the truth.

Jesus calls the Spirit, the "advocate." The Greek here is *paracletos*. It means one who pleads another's cause before a judge or an intercessor.

Jesus says that the Spirit will glorify him—the Spirit will vindicate the crucified and risen Christ as God's anointed one chosen to bring salvation to the nations.

From John 15-16, we learn that the Spirit is our Advocate in Jesus' physical absence.

We learn that the Holy Spirit guides us into truth, glorifies Jesus, and represents us, stands in our place before any who would accuse us.

Acts 2:1-22

This is the most well known Pentecost text.

In this passage we see the coming of the Holy Spirit in power to the early disciples, waiting and expectant in Jerusalem, just as Jesus commanded them in Luke 24.

In Acts, we witness the spectacular imagery of tongues of fire resting upon the people, of strange and unexpected languages proclaiming God's deeds of power."

We see Peter's powerful linking of the descent of the Spirit with the prophet Joel and with the promise of Jesus himself.

We see the Spirit giving birth to the church.

From Acts, we learn that the Spirit pours out life to all people, men, women, regardless of age, race, class, social status.

From Acts 2, we learn that the Holy Spirit is the response to a long-awaited hope of Israel foretold by the prophets.

We learn that the Spirit is no respecter of the tongues that were divided at Babel.

We learn that the Spirit breathes life where the Spirit breathes life, irrespective of how and where we think God ought to be found.

Romans 8:22-27

The last text that I want to look at from the readers' theater comes from Paul's letter to the church in Rome.

It comes in the context of a discussion of present suffering and future glory.

The early church was well acquainted with suffering. They were a persecuted minority in a brutal empire. Many of the first apostles died premature, violent deaths.

To these people, Paul writes of the role of the Spirit to help us in our weakness, to strengthen hope, to increase patience, and to sigh, to groan along with us.

From Romans 8, we learn that when we don't know what to pray, when we feel like we can't pray, when we don't even want to pray... When hope is difficult and patience is running out... When we are weary and broken down, the Holy Spirit is there with us, alongside us, groaning along with us.

I want to tell a story from the life of our church to illustrate this last point, and this will lead us into the Lord's Supper.

On Thursday, I spent the afternoon and evening with a group of young adults from around the world who were visiting our area and our church as part of MCC Alberta's Planting Peace Program.

The idea behind the program is to gather young adults from many different places for two weeks in Alberta to learn, to share stories, and to share life together.

The hope (and the reality) is that the participants will come to deeper understandings of their common humanity, and that their common commitment to peace and to breaking down of walls that we human beings are so good at erecting between each other will be strengthened.

On Thursday, there were young adults from Kenya, Cambodia, Guatemala, Mexico, Bolivia, South Africa, and, of course, from various parts of Canada. It was a good day full of good stories.

There were also two young men from Syria.

This caught my attention for obvious reasons.

1. Because of the grave crisis that is taking place in that country;
2. Because of our church's recent commitment to sponsor Syrian refugees to come to Lethbridge.

Father Lukas Awad, an Orthodox priest, and Subhi Naddaf, a humanitarian worker, both came from the city of Homs, the "capital of the revolution," the place where many trace the origins of the Syrian civil war that has claimed tens of thousands of lives and displaced nearly half of the Syrian population (over ten million people).

Indeed, there have been more deaths in Homs and its vicinity than any other area of Syria.

It was incredible to listen to the stories of these two men.

Father Lukas spoke about how ISIS had just the previous day taken the city of Palmyra¹, only 100 km from his home. He spoke about the destruction that this group has visited upon his country, about the brutal and merciless ideology that holds countless people in fear every day. He spoke of his uncertainty about what the future might hold for him, for his wife and his two children, aged ten and five, and for his church.

Subhi spoke of walking down the street and having bullets whiz past him, about this being "normal. He talked about how he was coordinating a child-friendly space for kids of displaced families in Homs. He spoke of being the last remaining member of his family who had not left the city. He spoke of how 90% of his evangelical Presbyterian church has fled the city, about how his parents had gone to Germany, his sister to Italy, but about how he was staying. For now.

¹ <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/isis-captures-part-of-ancient-syrian-city-of-palmyra-home-to-unesco-world-heritage-site-1.3080207>

During both conversations, I felt myself at a loss for words. What does one say, in response to such things?

On Friday, as I thought about these conversations, I was reminded of how one of the roles of the Spirit is simply to groan, to sigh alongside a groaning and sighing creation.

The Spirit prays for us when we have no words.

Like when our hearts break for two Syrian brothers who will go back to a context of unspeakable violence and fear.

Like when we feel like any words we might say to them are too soaked in comfort and privilege to be of any use.

Like when we simply feel like weeping for the barbarism that human beings are capable of.

The Spirit gives a shape, a texture, an anchor in the life of God to all of our sadness, our longing, our hope.

At the end of our time together on Thursday night, our two Syrian brothers performed a benediction for us.

Subhi played piano and Father Lukas sang the Lord's Prayer in Aramaic, the language of the community he serves, the language of Jesus.

We stood with him, we bowed our heads and we listened to a song in a tongue that we did not understand, praying for us, praying with us, groaning with us, groaning for us.

The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words (Romans 8:26).

Pentecost Sunday is not about showy displays of super-spirituality. That's not what the Holy Spirit is about either.

Through the four texts we have briefly looked at today, we are given four windows into the vital role of the Holy Spirit in our lives today.

1. Ezekiel: To breath life into what seems dead. To make dry bones dance.
2. John: To guide us into truth, to serve as the Advocate of God's people. To glorify Jesus.
3. Acts: To undo the divisions that began with Babel. To speak one vision through many tongues, to give birth to a diverse and beautiful church
4. Romans: To groan alongside of a groaning creation, and to put words to our wordless pain.

Thanks be to God for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

