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Sermon: June 4, 2017  
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“THE BREATH OF LIFE”

Psalm 104:29b-30; Acts 2:2-4

? What is your favorite holiday?

? What about Arbor Day? Anyone?

☑ The first Arbor Day was held in a village in Spain in 1805. *American Arbor Day* originated in Nebraska City, Nebraska on April 10, 1872. It was conceived by J. Sterling Morton, whose son founded the Morton Salt Company and established the Morton Arboretum in Lisle. Now it is observed in spring in many nations around the world.

☑<sup>ff</sup> The mission of the Arbor Day Foundation is to **“inspire people to plant, nurture, and celebrate trees.”**

Trees are a critical source of building materials, and without them we would not have wood pulp to make paper.

They yield fruits and nuts for our pleasure. Many species of birds, wildlife, and insects would go extinct without the sustenance and shelter they provide.

Trees reduce water runoff and soil erosion.

Their shade doesn't merely make us think cool thoughts, it actually lowers the temperature, which reduces the demand for a/c. More importantly, it protects people with respiratory diseases, congestive heart failure, etc.

The beauty of trees is priceless. Their forms and colors and sounds nourish our souls.

★ {sciencefocus.com} Above all, we could not breathe without trees. They consume CO<sub>2</sub> and release O<sub>2</sub> into the

atmosphere. Seven or eight trees provide enough oxygen to sustain one human being.

Thank God, he created trees, amen?! Still, no one named Arbor Day as their favorite. This is a festival that we don't quite know what to do with.

? It is similar to Pentecost in that regard, isn't it?

★ We know that Christian Pentecost commemorates the day when God first filled the gathered believers with his Holy Spirit.

I say “Christian” because faithful Jews have observed Πεντηκοστη [Pentēkostē] ever since YHWH commanded it during the Exodus.

📖 This festival falls on the fiftieth day after Passover, and Πεντηκοστη is Greek for 50<sup>th</sup>. Jews call it *Shavuot* (Feast of Weeks) and *Yom ha-Bikkurim* (Day of First Fruits) and *ha-Katzir* (Harvest Feast).

★ We know Pentecost is the anniversary of the birth of the Church universal, *the* Church with a capital “C”. The Church would not exist without Pentecost.

★ {Ge 1:2; Mk 3:29} We know Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity. He is worthy of utmost reverence.

★ {Jn 16:8, 13; Ro 8:2, 16; I Co 12:1-11, 28; Eph 4:3; Gal 5:22-23; II Th 2:13} We might be aware that Holy Spirit guides us into truth, convicts us of sin, sets us free from the law of sin and death, sanctifies us (i.e., conforms us to the holiness of Christ), affirms our adoption by God, unites us in the bond of peace, sows **“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control”** within us, bestows

spiritual gifts for the common good, and calls us to serve in various capacities.

And so, on this day we read the proclamation from Acts chapter 2, sing thematic songs, and turn our attention to God the Spirit.

Still, Pentecost seems a little abstract, doesn't it? It lacks the heart-warming beauty of Christmas and the raw power of Good Friday and Easter.

‽ How can we really celebrate this festival?

Let's breeze through a few key texts.

- Genesis 1:1-2: <sup>1</sup> **“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. <sup>2</sup> Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God”** – the rû(a)ḥ of God – **“was hovering over the waters.”**

- Genesis 2:7: **“Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath”** – the n<sup>e</sup> shāmâ – **“of life, and the man became a living being.”**

Old Testament authors frequently use rû(a)ḥ and n<sup>e</sup> shāmâ together. Spirit, breath, and wind are intertwined.

The Holy Spirit is there. YHWH breathes out his breath, and the lifeless human comes to life.

- Ezekiel 37 records the prophet's vision of a valley filled with human bones. They symbolize the Israelites, who feel as if they are dead: {11} **“Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone,”** they say.

<sup>9</sup> **Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath;”** the rû(a)ḥ – **“prophecy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come, breath, from the four winds”** – also rû(a)ḥ – **“and breathe into these slain, that they may live.”** <sup>10</sup> **So I prophesied ... and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet.”**

A few lines later the Almighty explains, <sup>14</sup> **“I will put my Spirit”** – rû(a)ḥ – **“in you, and you will live.”**

The Holy Spirit is there. Through his prophet YHWH commands the breath, and dead Israel is revived.

- Fast forward to John 20:21-22. The risen Messiah appears to his disciples, saying: <sup>21</sup> **“Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”** <sup>22</sup> **And with that he [breathes] on them and [says], ‘Receive the Holy Spirit,’** πνευμα ἁγιον [pneuma hágion].”

Πνευμα is Greek for wind, breath, and spirit. These concepts are as tightly interwoven in the New Testament as in the Old.

- The first Christian Pentecost occurs ten days after Christ's ascension into heaven. Acts 2:2-4:

<sup>2</sup> **Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind** – **“wind”** is πνοη [pnoē], and it shares a common root with πνευμα – **came from heaven and filled the whole house**

**where they were sitting.** <sup>3</sup> **They saw what appeared to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.** <sup>4</sup> **All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit** (the πνευμα ἁγιον) **and began to speak in other tongues as the Holy Spirit enabled them.**

The Spirit's coming is marked by **“a sound like the blowing of a violent wind.”**

**“The Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” “Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.”**

The Almighty commands Ezekiel to command the breath. It comes from the four winds and enters into the bodies of the slain, and they live again.

When Christ Jesus commands his apostles to **“Receive the Holy Spirit,”** he breathes on them.

At Pentecost, God's Spirit comes with **“a sound like the blowing of a violent wind.”** The Christ Followers are **“filled with the Holy Spirit.”**

Breath, wind, spirit. Rû(a)ḥ and n<sup>e</sup> shāmâ in the Old Testament, πνευμα and πνοη in the NT.

Take a few moments and just breathe.

Feel the breath, the wind (so to speak), enter you and fill your lungs. Feel it leave your body.

We seldom notice the air, except when our supply is cut off. Then it has our undivided attention.

Likewise, our capacity to breathe. We take inhaling and exhaling for granted until we can't do it. Suddenly it is more precious than gold, more precious than food, more precious than water.

Just breathe. Feel the breath, the wind, enter you and fill your lungs. Feel it leave your body.

‡ How does this exercise connect us with the Lord this Day of Pentecost?

■ Psalm 104:29b-30 might help tie it together for us:

<sup>29</sup> **When you hide your face,  
they are terrified;  
when you take away their breath, – rû(a)ḥ –  
they die and return to the dust.**

<sup>30</sup> **When you send your Spirit – rû(a)ḥ –  
they are created,  
and you renew the face of the ground.**

✎ First observation: breath, or wind, is life. Without it we perish. This is true physically and spiritually.

The Holy Spirit, who was initially sent to fill Christ followers at the first Christian Pentecost, is the breath of God. By him we **“are created”** and renewed. Apart from him, we **“die and return to the dust.”**

✎ Second observation: breath gives life only when it enters our bodies. We can be surrounded by wholesome air but if we do not inhale it, or if some incapacity prevents our tissues from absorbing the oxygen, we will not benefit. This is true physically and spiritually. Academic knowledge

of the Spirit is not sufficient. Neither is association with people who are breathing for themselves.

✎ Third observation: this demands active engagement. When God breathes, or blows, or moves anywhere near us, let us inhale as if our lives depend on it. We cannot control the Spirit's coming and going by praying the right words or performing the correct rituals. But we can be attentive and connect with him when he shows up.

‡ What do I mean? To inhale is to seek the Lord and connect with him.

We do this in prayers of praise and thanksgiving and petition and pleading. We do it in worship, together and alone. We do it by partaking of Holy Communion.

We do this by ingesting the Word, reading and studying and meditating upon it. We do it by interacting with others, above all brothers and sisters in Christ.

We do this by enjoying the Creation which God designed and made. We do it by looking for signs of his work in the events of our lives.

We do this by following the way of the Cross. We do it by devoting ourselves to the Great Love Commandments and the Great Commission.

Arbor Day is about “[inspiring] **people to plant, nurture, and celebrate trees.**” That is important, not least because we could not breathe without trees.

Pentecost is even more worthwhile. It is about celebrating the life, the presence of God which come to us in the gift of his wind, his breath, his Holy Spirit.

These Scriptures are the word of the Lord.