Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





by Pat Marrin

View Author Profile
patrickjmarrin@gmail.com.

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“He breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 20:23).

Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2:1-11; Ps 104; 1 Cor 12:3b-7, 12-13; John 20:19-23

When 37-year-old neurosurgeon Paul Kalinithi died of lung cancer in 2015, he and his wife had already completed an autobiographical memoir that was published in January 2016. Its title was “When Breath Becomes Air,” a simple, stark description of the fact of death.

As the church celebrates Pentecost 2020, breath has become synonymous with life and death as a deadly virus transmitted by breathing reaps a grim harvest worldwide, with over 100,000 lives lost in the United States alone. Compounding this crisis, the death of a black man suffocated during an arrest in Minneapolis has plunged the country into protests echoing the victim’s last words while pinned to the ground by four police officers: “I can’t breathe!”

Pentecost commemorates the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Breath that brought new life to the followers of Jesus huddled in a locked room in Jerusalem. Acts tells us they emerged speaking in every tongue as they proclaimed the triumph of life over death because of the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection from the dead.

The text in Acts invokes the creation story when *Ruah*, the breath of God, moved over the face of the earth, the story of the Tower of Babel, the pillar of fire that led the Hebrews out of Egypt, the story of Elijah hiding in a cave on Mount Horeb as God

passes by, and Ezekiel prophesying over the dry bones of Israel in exile.

John’s Gospel compresses the story of salvation on Golgatha as all seven signs of Jesus’ divinity are fulfilled simultaneously on the cross. He dies by prolonged suffocation — the intent of crucifixion — crying out with his last breath, “Completed.” For John, the “lifting up of the son of man” includes his death, his Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecost. Jesus reveals the divine *kenosis*, God’s self-emptying love for a sinful world. From Jesus' crucified body flows water and blood, symbols of Baptism and Eucharist. Because of Jesus, air became breath again, the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost this year is forcing us to reflect honestly as Christians on our nation’s history and ideals in the light of longstanding violence and discrimination against black Americans and all people of color. Taylor Branch’s history, *America in the King Years,* tied the civil right struggle to the story of the Exodus when he named his trilogy with biblical references: *Parting the Waters, Pillar of Fire*, and *At Canaan’s Edge.* Like fellow Southerner William Faulkner, Branch addresses violent racism as the “original sin” of American history, a virus that has replicated in every generation from the beginning. Left unresolved, it has undermined every American ideal and is again defying hope for national unity. It was Dr. King's dream to use nonviolent confrontation to get America to keeps its promises to all her citizens, and it cost him his life.

Jesus’ promise of the Holy Spirit is not a comfort zone but a staging area and urgent summons to his disciples to take up the difficult challenges of reconciliation and nonviolent change for justice. Without healing and forgiveness, our communities will never be secure or offer our children the future we want for them. A deep conversion of heart is needed to move America beyond the anger and fear that are suffocating hope and destroying so many lives.

Pentecost 2020 will long be remembered for the pandemic and now the rioting and social turmoil over racial inequality. Will it also be remembered and celebrated as a time when we chose community over chaos and courage over despair? “Peace be with you,” Jesus is saying. Don’t be afraid, for I am sending you the Holy Breath to embolden you, so that together we can renew the face of the earth.

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