

There's a wonderful old African-American spiritual, "Every time I feel the Spirit." In that song, there are very different descriptions of the manifestations of the Holy Spirit.

On the one hand, we have a rather forceful description of the Spirit speaking: "Up on the mountain my Lord spoke. Out of His mouth came fire and smoke." This is a very powerful image, congruent with how the Holy Spirit comes at times.

Yet, this spiritual also contains a quieter, more inwardly focused acknowledgment of the Spirit's presence: "Every time I feel the Spirit movin' in my heart I will pray."

That's quite a contrast. Mountain, fire and smoke. And moving in my heart.

That contrast is certainly apparent in our readings from John and Acts. If you open any Bible, they're only a few pages apart. Luke's account of Pentecost in Acts ch2, and John's very different account of the giving of the Holy Spirit towards the end of his Gospel in chapter 20.

We claim both of these accounts as scripture. In most Bibles, there are only 2 or 3 pieces of paper that separate them. And yet, the two accounts are very different.

In John, the giving of the gift of the Holy Spirit occurs on Easter night. In John ch20, the disciples are hiding behind locked doors. But Jesus suddenly appears in their midst. After they get over their shock, Jesus commissions the disciples to go forth as his messengers, his ambassadors, his apostles. "As the Father has sent me," he tells them, "so I send you."¹

And then Jesus equips them for that mission. Jesus breathes on the disciples and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."²

In other words, the disciples are given a mission to do what only God and Jesus have done up to this point. They are given power to forgive sins in Jesus' name. And they are empowered to do it by the Holy Spirit, breathed on them by Jesus.

By contrast, Luke paints a very different picture of the giving of the Spirit. In Acts ch2 the disciples are gathered together during a Jewish holiday, a Jewish feast day, the fiftieth day after the Passover. The Greek word for fiftieth day is "pentekoste," from which we get Pentecost. On Pentecost, Luke tells us, the Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples in a rather forceful way.

¹ Jn 20:21

² Jn 20:22

Luke tells us that as they were together, "there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind."³ He doesn't say it was wind. But it was like wind. And, "divided tongues as of fire appeared among them."⁴ Again, he doesn't say it was fire. He says it was like fire.

And in the midst of this sound and light show, the disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit. And they're given the gift of being able to speak in other languages. This equips them to begin to carry out their mission as apostles. They are given the power to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

Now this is a somewhat different picture from the one in John.

Gentle breath on the one hand. The sound like the rush of a violent wind and tongues like fire on the other.

What are we to make of these two very different accounts? What are John and Luke trying to tell us about the Holy Spirit? What's the meaning and the message?

To get at that question, we need to look backwards to three things: 1. back to the meaning of the word Spirit, 2. back to the beginnings of both John and Luke, and 3. even further back to the Old Testament.

First, the meaning of the word "Spirit." In New Testament Greek, the word we translate as Spirit is *pneuma*, which begins with a silent 'p.' *Pneuma* is the root of the English words *pneumatic*, and *pneumonia*.

In Greek, *pneuma* has a double meaning. *Pneuma* means wind. And *pneuma* also means breath. God's Holy Spirit is God's Holy *Pneuma*. It is the breath of God. It is the wind of God. Thus for John and Acts to describe the Spirit as breath and wind is not surprising. It is inherent in the term.

Second, both accounts point back to earlier themes in John and Luke. Both fulfill the promise of Jesus' Baptism as described by the two authors.

In the chapter 1 of the Gospel according to John, John the Baptizer calls Jesus, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."⁵ In John chapter 20, Jesus' power to forgive sins is extended to the disciples through the Spirit.

In the Gospel According to Luke, John the Baptist speaks of one coming who will baptize with the Holy *Pneuma*, Holy Wind and Fire.⁶ Later, in Luke's account of Pentecost, it is with wind and fire that the Spirit comes.

³ Acts 2:2

⁴ Acts 2:3

⁵ Jn 1:29

⁶ Lk 3:16

Both John and Luke show the promises of Jesus' baptism fulfilled in the giving of the Holy Spirit.

Third, both accounts are positively saturated with Old Testament imagery. Both John and Luke point back towards the action of God in the past as recorded in Scripture.

In John's account, Jesus breathes on the disciples. Jesus gives the disciples God's Holy Breath. In the Old Testament, breath is life. And God's breath, especially, brings life.

In Genesis when God creates Adam from the dust, God breathes into him to bring him to life.⁷

The book of Job uses the image of breath constantly. Job says, "The spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life."⁸

And in Ezekiel, it is God's breath breathed into the valley of the dry bones that restores the dead to life.⁹

For John, the gift of the Holy Pneuma is a gift of Holy Breath. It is a gift that gives life. That is one of John's major themes, that Jesus has come to give life. And at the end of the Gospel, Jesus does just that. He breathes on his disciples, he gives them life in a very concrete way.

For Luke, on the other hand, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Pneuma, comes not so much in the form of a gentle breath, but instead, it comes as a mighty and violent wind. And it comes accompanied by fire. For Luke, the significance of Wind and Fire is tied up in the original Jewish meaning of the Feast of Pentecost.

For the Jews, the Feast of Pentecost had a double significance. First of all, it was a harvest festival. It was a time to give thanks to God at the harvest of the first crop of wheat. At the wheat harvest, the wheat was separated from the chaff on the threshing floor. The wind blew the chaff away, and the chaff was later burned with fire, but the grains of wheat were retained.

And, sure enough, in Luke's account of Pentecost, God's Holy Wind blows through the people of Jerusalem and separates out a harvest. Luke says at the end of Chapter 2 of Acts, that 3,000 were baptized that day after listening to the preaching of Peter and the other apostles.¹⁰

But there is another significance to the Jewish celebration of Pentecost that is important for Luke. The 50th day after Passover was and is for the Jews a celebration of the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai, which they believe took place 50 days after the first Passover in Egypt. Pentecost is a remembrance of the giving of the 10 Commandments to Moses. On the mountain, God appeared in the midst of storm, in the midst of wind and thunder and lightning.

⁷ Gen 2:7

⁸ Job 33:4

⁹ Ezek 37:10

¹⁰ Acts 2:41

And God, Exodus tells us, descended upon Mt. Sinai in fire. For Luke, the wind and fire of the feast of Pentecost accompanies the new gift of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem. And it is also a reminder of the wind and fire of the first Pentecost on Mt. Sinai, when God appeared in wind and fire to give the law to his people.

From Luke and John's accounts of Pentecost, we have different pictures of the action of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Pneuma. In John we have God's gentle breath. In Luke we have God's violent wind. Is one of these images better or more important than the other?

I would say—no. Both images are important. Both images suggest ways that the Holy Spirit of God is still alive and active in the Church. Both images suggest ways the Holy Spirit continues to interact with us as Christians. And both are ways that we need God to come to us at different times in our spiritual lives.

Perhaps as American Christians we focus more of the time on the gentle actions of the Holy Spirit, the personal aspects of God's Holy Breath.

Now, of course, these manifestations of the Spirit are very important. The breath of God is very intimate. It is very personal. It is very much part of the interior. Our bodies are described as temples of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is within us and becomes part of us, as surely as the air that we breathe is drawn inside us and made a part of us. This is a wonderful reality about the work and nature of the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit is a very intimate, nurturing, individual gift that is given to us. The breath of the Holy Spirit comes gently from the mouth of Jesus. The Holy Spirit gives life and sustains life.

But we mustn't forget that God's Holy Breath is also God's Holy Wind. And just as breath is intimate and a part of us, God's wind is very distinct from us.

God's wind is not always gentle. God's wind does not always blow the way we want it to. God's wind is very different and very separate from us. It is outside us, it is transcendent, it does what it wants to do.

The Wind of God comes to blow away the debris around us. God's wind comes to bring change, to create resistance, to make us struggle. And yet, at times that struggle is essential for spiritual growth. We can't stop God's wind, we can't control it. We can only be guided by it.

Both John and Luke's differing versions of the gift of Pentecost are important. Both capture important aspects of the nature of the Holy Pneuma, as gentle breath, and as strong wind. The Spirit comes both as the gentle gift of Jesus and as the powerful gift of a transcendent God.

"Up on the mountain my Lord spoke; out of His mouth came fire and smoke... Every time I feel the Spirit movin' in my heart I will pray."

Come Holy Spirit. Empower us with your gifts. Fill our hearts with your breath. Stir us with your fire and wind. Come Holy Spirit, come.