

“Life-giving Spirit” Numbers 11:24-30 May 11, 2008, Rev. Joyce Kirk-Moore

You may think that this scripture is a little strange for a Sunday when Pentecost and Mother’s Day falls on the same day. Actually, I do, too. I’ve always preached on the traditional texts for Pentecost from Acts, so this year I thought I’d preach from the Hebrew text, but by Friday afternoon I was questioning my decision. The operative verse from the book of Numbers is: **Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets and the Lord would put his spirit on them.** That is the verse I want to focus on. The verses before this passage tell about the Hebrews complaining about not having meat to eat. They whine that at least in Egypt (though they were in slavery) they had meat. Then the verses after this text are about the Hebrews’ ingratitude even as they gorge themselves on quail that God sends in order to stop their complaining. So I just want to skip the complaining, skip the ingratitude, and focus on Moses’ words: **Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets and the Lord would put his spirit on them.**

The spirit Moses is talking about is God’s life-giving spirit. In the midst of all too human affairs of life, God gives the Spirit to God’s people. It is an extraordinary gift. So extraordinary that people prize it as a gift given only to a few, but Moses understands better. **Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets and the Lord would put his spirit on them.** And of course, much later in the book of Acts describes the letting loose of the spirit to all gathered, people from every nation. The spirit that gives life is God’s gift to give, and God chooses to give it extravagantly. Sharing the spirit becomes the church’s reason for being. Letting loose this gift of new life, God’s breath once again infused into creation, is the church’s mission in the world. The manner of this letting loose of God’s breath, God’s essence into the world is not limited to one church building, a few true words, a doctrinal requirement. God’s breath is dynamic, living, uncontrollable, full of surprises, responsive to the moment, and creative.

Today we celebrate and honor one way God’s life-giving spirit has come to us, and that is through the gifts of mothering and nurture. These gifts come not only through our birth mothers but also through all those who nurtured our lives and fostered our growth--grandmothers, aunts, mothers-in-laws, sisters, wise women, and also the men who birthed us through love and nurture to become our best selves. The spirit is not gender specific. It is in those people who listened to our complaints and needs (like Moses did for the Hebrews) and who intervened on our behalfs. The spirit is in those people who noticed us and encouraged us to become and express our true selves. We honor the spirit of the wise ones in our lives who knew what to say, when to say it, and when to be a silent presence. God’s life-giving spirit comes to us through all who are willing to share it and let its power of creative love loose in creation.

But Moses spoke of the life-giving spirit as also a spirit of prophecy and we know that prophecy was not so much about telling the future as it was about telling the truth. Moses places prophecy and life-giving spirit in the same sentence. **Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets and the Lord would put his spirit on them.** Every mother or anyone who has given the gifts of mothering has known the pain of also being a prophet--of telling a hard truth, of teaching truth and consequences, of telling the truth in love and then letting go, releasing the one we love to forge his or her own future. This is when we are glad to know there is a life-giving spirit that is above all others in whom ultimately we place our trust.

The day of Pentecost was one of those truth telling days. Those emboldened with God’s life-giving spirit told it like it was, proclaimed the truth of God’s in-carnation, in creation, God’s love come to earth, to people who were depressed, despondent, and dying. The spirit gave them life and hope. Now it wasn’t as though the church was A-OK after the day of Pentecost. The

church has struggled and continues to struggle and some folks give up on church because it isn't always 100% life-giving, but I prefer to believe that our failures as humans do not thwart the spirit of God that is ever present, ever encouraging, and always drawing us towards light. The imperfect church becomes a vessel for God's spirit which cannot be controlled, contained, or limited even by our shortcomings.

In this morning's Los Angeles Times, Steve Lopez wrote a reflection on his recent visit to All Saints' Church where he spoke about his relationship to a homeless man who is also a gifted musician. Lopez was so impressed with the church community that the next week he went to visit the rector, Rev. Bacon. Here's part of their discussion: *Bacon said he has been both an atheist and an agnostic at various times in his life, but neither discipline explained what he felt in his soul. "There is something bigger than me, and it's love. There's a spiritual force that's greater than evil or war. It's in me, and there are things I can do to activate it." When I asked Bacon why I couldn't activate it from home, the lazy man way, he said I'd already answered the question when I told him about the spirit of community I'd felt last Sunday. He said his friend Bishop Desmond Tutu calls it ubuntu. "It's an African word meaning you can't be human alone." L.A Times, May 11, 2008, Steve Lopez.*

We may be tempted to ask where is God when natural disasters like the cyclone in Myanmar kill and destroy so much life. Where is the life-giving spirit? Why isn't the spirit of life distributed equally throughout God's world? It is hard to understand; we want a God to make this world right and fair and just. It is hard to accept that while God's life-giving spirit is flowing out into the world, there are powers that at the same time wreak havoc that are not of God. If we wish to perpetuate God's life-giving spirit, we can do so by being a field of force for good in the world. We can give to help those in distress. In fact, because you have given to Church World Service through One Great Hour of Sharing, you have been on the ground in Myanmar even before the cyclone and remain even today helping the helpless. When we prepared emergency kits last summer for Church World Service, we were preparing for this day. When we contribute to our emergency cleaning buckets of love during May and June, we are preparing to share the life-giving spirit. The church born that first Pentecost day was all about spreading God's spirit of life into the far corners of the world. It required the church to give of themselves and to share their resources because the church, we, are people called, anointed, and empowered to give the life-giving spirit however we are able to do so.

Perhaps birth, mothering, and the life-giving spirit of Pentecost are fitting themes to talk about together on one Sunday. The thing I remember about becoming a mother is that it totally overtakes one; life is forever oriented differently; priorities are radically changed; and one's life becomes an unending love story with all the joys, pain, laughter and sorrow that loving another person so completely involves. In the words of the song: *Love Changes Everything*. As people of faith, we believe that God's love changes everything. It overtakes our lives, changes our orientation and priorities and thrust us into a world of sharing God's unending love story for all God has made. Today we give thanks for all who have shared with us the gifts of mothering and we give thanks to God who first gave us the spirit of life. A few years ago I bought this calligraphy at a conference. It says: *The day you were born, God danced*. It seems a fitting metaphor. It gave God great joy to bestow on us the breath of life, the life-giving spirit, and it gives God great joy to see that spirit expressed in and through us both as individuals and as church. And so we pray that the Pentecostal fire will energize us for the tasks ahead, and we dedicate ourselves to passing the torch of God's life-giving spirit one to another till it reaches the ends of the earth. AMEN

