

The Feast of Pentecost, 31 May 2009  
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR  
The Rev'd Raggs Ragan, Rector

Alleluia! It is delightful to highlight that joyful Easter word with the ringing of bells. This is our last day with all those extra alleluias. They are a primary feature of the fifty-day celebration of Jesus' resurrection and all it means for us. After this weekend's services, the Paschal candle will be extinguished and we will return to the more modest number of alleluias of 'ordinary time'.

So we ring with great enthusiasm in these last moments of our great Easter celebration.

What does it mean when we extinguish the Paschal Candle and trim the alleluias? One aspect is that the extinguishing of the candle reminds us that the risen life of Christ is no longer limited to a physical Jesus walking around Palestine. The light goes out there, because now it is in each of us.

The most famous images of this day show the gathered faithful with flames over their heads, representing the Spirit that had come upon each of them. They had become the candles shining with the risen life and light of Christ. Now we are the candles shining with Christ's light. So when you see the candle extinguished at the end of the service, after the last Alleluia, imagine that the flame has migrated from the candle to rest right over your head. See if you can see it over your neighbor's head. Each of us has been lit by the spirit, 'to be a light to enlighten the nations.'

Eastertide, stretching from the Great Vigil of Easter through the day of Pentecost, is our grand party. But we cannot party all of the time. The season which begins tomorrow is by far the longest season of the church year. In a way it is a non-season.

Our church year begins with Advent, focusing on Mary's pregnancy, the coming of the Messiah, in Jesus' birth and again at the end of all things. Then we celebrate the Incarnation at Christmas and the many ways God is revealed in Jesus' life during the season of Epiphany. In Lent we spend our time in the desert, as Jesus did, preparing for the grand celebration. Then in Holy Week we live through the last days of Jesus' earthly life. Then the Great Fifty Days, our grand party immersing ourselves in the resurrection. These are all seasons focused moments of the history of God in Christ.

Tomorrow we begin something different, the Season after Pentecost. My favorite name for it is 'Ordinary Time'. This is our time, the time of our living and working, the time of our daily activity of faithfully bringing in the Kingdom of God. It is still a time of joy, so there are still Alleluias, just not as many.

Most of Eastertide focuses on Jesus' resurrection appearances, all the times when he came to his followers and ate with them, talked with them, reassured them. For that first generation, this was a time to establish their faith, to sort out confusion, to fully absorb the astonishing truth of this new life offered in Christ.

Then at the Ascension, Jesus is no longer there around the fire or at the dinner table as he had been. It was a time that tested their confidence, a time of waiting.

And today the focus shifts to the Holy Spirit. With that symbolic flame over each head comes courage and wisdom, the ability to carry on doing the work that has been entrusted to us.

Our hymns focus on our relationship with God's spirit. We just sang "Breathe on me, breath of God" It begins

Breathe on me, breath of God,  
Fill me with life anew,  
That I may love what Thou dost love,  
And do what Thou wouldst do"

So we are seeking that spirit, that flame that will transform our hearts and minds and lives to be the lives that are congruous with God in Christ.

We know that it is only by God's Spirit that we have life at all, as pointed out in that wonderful reading from Ezekiel. We often lack the confidence that we can live and thrive, that we can communicate and draw others to faith. We say, like the Israelites of Ezekiel's time, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." And when we are dispirited, the Spirit comes into our valley of dry bones, breathes on us and gives us life – and hope!

At the offertory we will sing, "Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire and lighten with celestial fire." This is an ancient hymn mandated to be sung at ordinations as hands are laid on the individual ordinands. That flame which came upon the members of that first Christian community is contagious. It is passed from one to another by the laying on of hands. Body touches body; spirit touches spirit.

But the Spirit, the flame of risen life, is not only passed by the laying on of hands, as we heard in the Acts reading about the first Pentecost. There the Spirit came through a miracle of communication. Everyone in that Jerusalem square heard the truth of God in their own native tongue. Everyone could understand and everyone could be understood. No one was outside the circle of understanding.

To catch the feeling of that remarkable morning, imagine yourself in a place where you do not know the language – a Chinese village, a Kenyan church, wherever occurs to you. People are all around you, conversing or arguing or worshiping, and through the din of incomprehensible speech you catch the familiar sound of English words – and you tune your ear in that direction and begin to hear whole sentences, ideas you can understand. It is a wonderful feeling. Suddenly you are at home, however alien the place. Suddenly you are able to connect. That is a gift of God's spirit, whenever we are able to truly communicate – to hear and understand, to speak and be understood.

Those first people to catch the flame of the Spirit had not just completed the world's fastest language course, they had been breathed on by Jesus, and they had caught the fire, the Spirit of God which invites all people into conversation.

So when the candle is extinguished, know that the flame is not gone, it is on each one of us. It is a sign of that lifegiving breath of God flowing into and through us.

We closed this week's vestry meeting with a prayer by Cardinal Newman which included the wonderful lines, "O let us thus praise thee, in the way which thou dost love best, by shining on all those around us. Give light to them as well as to us; light them with us, through us." Light them with us, through us. We are the light of Christ when we allow the breath of God to breathe on us, when God's Spirit comes upon us.

Daniel Clendenin concludes this week's *Journey with Jesus* by saying, "In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for "spirit" (*ruach*) means breath or wind. The very first sentences of the Bible describe God's Spirit hovering over all creation like a tender mother (Genesis 1:2).

In the New Testament, the Spirit is called the *paraclete*, literally, one called alongside to help, an encourager, comforter or counselor. And in the earliest art of the first believers, the Spirit is a dove of peace descending into our lives to bring the presence of God's *shalom*, that is, anything and everything that nourishes human wholeness and well-being."

That is the Spirit, the Breath, the Comforter, the Dove and the Flame we welcome and celebrate today. So ring those bells and look for the subtle flames over your own and your neighbor's heads.

And as we move into the long season of our life and work, the ordinary time of the Church in the world, consider beginning each day with the simple and hopeful prayer, "Breathe on me, breath of God, Fill me with life anew, That I may love what Thou dost love, And do what Thou wouldst do."

And God will breathe on us, each and every day, to bless us and through us to bless the whole world.  
Alleluia!