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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
5/11/2008, Pentecost Sunday
John 20:19-23

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text this morning is from our Gospel Lesson. It speaks of the breath of Jesus:

²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." ²²And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."(John 20:21-22, RSV)

If someday you should attend the solemn Easter Vigil liturgy here at Immanuel, you will see a traditional imitation of this breathing of the Holy Spirit. The minister leads the Great Thanksgiving over the Baptismal font. Toward the end of that prayer, we reach what is called the "epiclesis" — that is, the part of the prayer that says, "Pour out your Holy Spirit, so that those who are here baptized may be given new life." At this point, the rubric says, "the minister may breathe on the water in the form of a cross," which I do.

Why would the liturgy connect breathing the Holy Spirit with Baptism? Answer: because Christians are meant to be bearers of the Spirit in this world. When Jesus breathed on this disciples and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit," he meant that gift not only for them, the apostles, but also for us who have believed in Christ through the witness of the apostles. You, my dear brothers and sisters in the Lord, are meant and called by Jesus to be Spiritbearers in a world that could really use the touch of the Holy Spirit.

Listen to some of the sweet words of St. Paul concerning the Holy Spirit and how right it is that the Holy Spirit should dwell within you:

Do you not know that your body is a temple *of the Holy Spirit within you*, which you have from God?(1 Cor. 6:19, RSV)

...God has sent *the Spirit of his Son* into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"(Galatians 4:6, NRS)

³More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts *through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us*.(Romans 5:3-5, RSV)

And the Gospel of St. John is filled with promises of the Holy Spirit. You might remember our Gospel text from two Sunday ago — the reading about the Paraclete. In the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord comforted his disciples with these words:

¹⁶I shall ask the Father, and he will give you another Paraclete to be with you for ever...(John 14:16, NJB)

Also, Jesus said this to his disciples:

⁷Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you.(John 16:7, KJV)

Now, in this morning's Gospel Lesson, Jesus fulfills his promise to send the Holy Spirit to his disciples and through them to us. And so, we have this morning's text:

²²And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."(John 20:22, RSV)

This is a sermon, then, about what it means for us to be bearers of the Holy Spirit. What is that like? And how might we become better at the job?

Let me try to answer these questions by speaking of the human phenomenon called "preoccupation." This, then, is a Pentecost sermon in praise of a kind of holy preoccupation.

I begin with speaking of dear Professor George Lindbeck, distinguished Lutheran theologian, now retired from Yale University. The things I say are meant to be to his credit, since Carol and I have much affection for the man. George Lindbeck is everything you could want in an elderly professor: white hair, white beard, walks with cane, slender, aesthetic-looking yet cheerful, measured, thoughtful pace to his speech, a born teacher, doctor father to many young theologians, respected the world over yet easy to talk with, kind-hearted, attentive to others.

And besides these traits there is another one for which Dr. Lindbeck is legendary: he is absent-minded. We experienced a touch of that absent-mindedness a few years ago when he preached here at Immanuel. When he arrived at the church, he was perturbed with himself because he had forgotten his sermon manuscript. He had simply left it on the train on his way up from Princeton, where he had been studying or teaching or writing. It did not matter – not a whit. He simply stepped into this sacred desk and preached a great sermon anyway. But those of us who had heard of his absentmindedness, were not surprised nor alarmed to hear that he had forgotten his manuscript.

One of the famous stories about him concerned a German theologian visiting Yale. Dr. Lindbeck recommended to his students that they plan on hearing this man's lecture the following evening. There was an awkward silence. Then one of the students said, "But Dr. Lindbeck, that lecture was last night. And you were there!"

Well, I suspect that the truth about Dr. Lindbeck is not so much that he is distinguished by absentmindedness as by preoccupation – indeed preoccupation with lofty and good subjects.

Now, imagine you and me being preoccupied that way. I do not mean preoccupied with business or sports, but with God! Oh! that we might be filled, transfixed, and lost in the "old, old story of Jesus and his love." Then, I say, we would be filled with the Holy Spirit and would leave a good mark on this world.

Pentecost Sunday invites us ponder the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in our own lives. This is a wondrous and large thought. It means that we are to be moved by that very Spirit that brooded over creation in the beginning and through which the Father commanded that there should be order. We are speaking of that Spirit that came upon Samson and permitted him to slay a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey.

We mean that Spirit that came upon the shepherd boy David and caused him to boldly go out to face Goliath but with a sling and three stones and to kill that mighty giant. We mean the Spirit that seized upon Jeremiah and Amos and all the great prophets and turned the world upside down with mighty preaching. Chief of all, we mean the Spirit of Jesus, which is a spirit of love, patience, courage, and readiness to suffer for the good.

Like light radiating a room, pouring in through the windows and illuminating the dwelling: so the Holy Spirit is poured forth into the Christian. Like a lovely fragrance in the robes of a bishop who spends each day swirling the thurifer amidst the incense¹, so the Holy Spirit is to make us a fragrant offering in our town:

And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.(Ephesians 5:2, RSV)

Again, I have come to think that the power of the Spirit in our lives is related to the matter of divine preoccupation. Let me give you an example: When I am at my best, when I am walking the sidewalks of the city same as everyone else but am thinking about Jesus and his love, when I am living here in the city but also living in what Karl Barth called “the strange new world of the Bible,” then I cannot be a pirate. Why? Because the Bible says so. But I am saying something more mysterious and more holy than the simple thought that to be a pirate is to fall short of the Bible. I am saying that to the degree that I am lost in the “strange new world of the Bible,” I *cannot* be a pirate. I literally cannot live that way. Why? Because when I am lost in the old, old story of Jesus and of his love, then my spirit is better and against being a pirate.

Now, one of the great things about being a pastor is that by vocation I am invited to get lost in the strange new world of the Bible. But my mother knew the Bible even better than I do, and she was not ordained. And because she lived in the strange new world of the Bible so much, she could not be a pirate, nor a mean neighbor, nor a neglectful mother, nor did she seem capable of any wickedness.

You can be like that. We tend to become like the one we ponder, so ponder Jesus some more in your life.

A few moments back, I used the phrase, “when I am at my best.” When I am at my best, lost in the story of Jesus and of his love, I cannot be a pirate. Well, let me close by telling you just how high it is when we are “at our best.”

It is very high. Indeed, one would wonder whether flesh and blood is capable of the dignity the Bible is willing to grant to the Christian. Why! The Bible supposes that under the influence of the Holy Spirit, you and I become participants in divinity. The Eastern Orthodox Church is especially good at lifting up this part of the faith, but they did not somehow randomly invite the notion. Rather, it is right there in the Bible to be reckoned with. Let me read aloud but three of many examples of the desire of the Triune God that we should be part of their divine family – even children of God.

First, there is the witness of St. Paul:

¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are *children of God*. ¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶it is that very Spirit

¹ I do not quite recall where I got these images of the light in the room and the fragrance in the robe – perhaps from John Henry Newman.

bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ-- if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.(Romans 8:14-17, NRS)

Second, we have the witness of St. Peter:

⁴Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become *participants of the divine nature*.(2 Peter 1:4, NRS)

And third, we have the witness of St. John:

²³Jesus answered him, “If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him *and make our home with him*.(John 14:23, RSV)

In a world where we might too readily speak of a “spark of divinity” in each of us, still it is a wonder and a stirring thing to imagine that our Maker might look at us and be led to say, “I behold a kindred spirit in that one.”

This is what we were made for. This is the point of baptism: that we should become so preoccupied with the Word of God and the story of Jesus that we will become transformed thereby, and in the process be a cause of some hope for our world, in the name of Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.