

MAY 31, 2009
DAY OF PENTECOST
“SECOND WIND”

Let us pray: Come Holy Spirit, revive and reinvigorate us with that “second wind” that breathes new life into our flagging spirits, giving us what we need to get up and get going in the race of life you’ve set before us. This I ask in Jesus name, our pace-setting Savior. Amen.

I’m never fancied myself a runner, though I can still make it up and down a basketball court at a pretty good pace—at least once—before needing to catch my breath. But I admire—if not quite comprehend—the stamina of those who can manage to finish a footrace, from a sprint to a 26 mile marathon like that run here in LA last Monday. Perhaps you’ve heard marathoners describe how at a certain point during the race they “hit the wall”—a kind of psychosomatic barrier that at first seems insurmountable, leading them to question their own powers of endurance. Those who somehow find the energy to run through “the wall” of their own

exhaustion often speak of getting their “second wind” —or “catching their breath,” as we say —getting their “second breath.”

Brad Braxton, the freshly called and installed preacher at Riverside Church in NYC, whom I once heard speak at Louisville Seminary, has suggested that Pentecost might well be thought of as the festival of the church’s getting its “second wind” from God—the “first wind” being that in-breathing—literally that “in-spiration”—described in the second Genesis creation account in which God forms the human one—*adam*—from the “*dust of the ground*”—the *adamah*—and then, the text says, Yahweh “*breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the human one became a living being.*” Our “first wind” is that originating gift of breath from the Creator that originally “enlivened” us as we emerged from our mother’s womb, sucking into our lungs that first breath of life—our first wind.

Our second wind is that envisioned by the prophet Ezekiel in today’s first reading—as what he calls the “spirit of the Lord”—which just as well could be translated as the “wind of God” or the

“breath of God” — wafted him into the middle of a valley filled with dried bones. I think of scenes like that which President Abraham Lincoln must have imagined as he looked out over the battlefield at Gettysburg as began his famous address. Or I think of the thousands of dead, machete-hacked, mutilated bodies that littered the countryside following the Rwandan genocide of a few years ago, or the scenes of piles of skulls uncovered in Cambodia following the Pol Pot massacres, or the unrivalled horror of the holocaust of 6 million Jews during the Nazi Third Reich to which, sadly and shamefully, our fellow Lutherans in Germany for the most part managed to ignore going on in their very midst in places like Dachau just a few kilometers from Augsburg where our LWF theological consultation recently met. The piles of shoes of all sizes, men’s and women’s and children's shoes--confiscated from those on their way to the ovens that are on display at the Holocaust Museum in our nation’s capitol is simply an unforgettable if understated reminder of the violent horrors of which we human ones are capable.

Recently I received the latest Reflections magazine, the alumni magazine of Yale Divinity School. I was surprised to find that the entire issue was devoted just one topic: the perilous fate of our world under the continuing threat of the existence of nuclear weapons sufficient to obliterate all life from our planet. Entitled “The Fire Next Time: Faith and the Future of Nuclear Weapons,” the magazine reprinted presentations from a recent Conference held at YDS on this topic—a topic that since the so-called “end” of the Cold War twenty years ago has receded to the margins of our public discourse—even as the threatened use of these honest-to-God “weapons of mass destruction” continues to increase amid a world in which the sole-surviving super-power is threatened not merely by its Soviet rival but in which the whole world is threatened by the prospect of nuclear arms falling into the hands of rogue powers and terrorist groups—both at home and abroad.

I don't mean to rain on your Pentecost, but I want us to get a realistic and vivid sense of the setting of Elijah's vision of that valley of dry

bones—into which God’s second wind—God’s recreating, reviving, restorative, resurrection breath was breathed. For, as the Lutheran theologian Gordon Lathrop has put it, “the coming of the Spirit is ... exactly the same as the community’s experience of the resurrection of Jesus, the encounter with his wounds, the knowledge in faith that this murdered one has been vindicated and is with God” as the resurrected and ascended Lord of all life.

The Spirit whose birthing of the church we celebrate today is simply, as Lathrop puts it, “God present”—the present tense of God—“seeing to it that the words and actions of Jesus Christ are alive in our midst as powerful words and actions, judging and forgiving, sending, giving life. The Spirit is all that belongs to Christ, all that pertains to him—and thus all that truly pertains to the ancient God—alive here and declared to us.”

In terms of last week’s Gospel, it is the Spirit that enables the church’s “witness”—or *martyros*—giving even the likes of you and me sufficient “power that the words about Jesus Christ

might be heard universally, that the particular story of a Judean execution might be everywhere life-giving. The Holy Spirit is the church's second wind breathing fresh, invigorating life into the story of Jesus we call the Gospel. The Spirit's inspiration is what empowers us to fresh understandings of our calling as church to be, in Lathrop's words, a "free space in the world...devoted to the death-reversing judgment of God, for the sake of the life and freedom of the world"—even, we might say, for the sake of the church being a death-reversing agent of hope in the midst of every valley of dry bones our human imaginations can envision—including the terror of nuclear winter or the catastrophe of global climate change.

One last thing. Jesus in our reading from John's Gospel twice refers to the "Advocate"—as he calls the Spirit whom he promises to send in his physical absence—as "the Spirit of truth." I love that depiction of the Spirit as "truth-teller" because it encourages us in our calling to be truth-tellers, to tell it "like it really is," as brother Martin used to put it—sticking to a realistic and plain-spoken theology

of the cross rather than the fancy dress clothes of a glitzy theology of glory, which only tells us what we want to hear. Truth-telling is to be a mark of our life together in the church and as church, for us as a congregation, for us as we join together as church in our synod later this week, and as our churchwide assembly gathers this August. There are critical and challenging issues that we face in our world today that cry desperately for the church's witness, not least the full inclusion of glbt folks in the life of our church and society—which sadly received a serious set-back, even if temporary, from the California Supreme Court this last week. May our church—for once!—find the courage to take the lead on this—as other—critical issues as the Spirit of Truth—our Advocate and Defender, gives us our “second wind.”

As one of our more contemporary Pentecost hymns sings:

*Spirit, Spirit of gentleness,
Blow through the wilderness, calling and free;
Spirit, Spirit of restlessness,
Stir me from placidness, wind, wind on the sea.*

*You call from tomorrow,
You break ancient schemes.
From the bondage of sorrow
All the captives dream dreams;
Our women see visions,
Our men clear their eyes.
With bold new decisions your people arise.*

The peace that passes understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.