

Numbers 11:24-30

Acts 2:1-21

John 7:37-39

### Conceived by the Holy Spirit

Sermon preached by Rev. Rob Gotch

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If we were to consider what we cannot live without, I imagine we'd identify a variety of relational and experiential possibilities: people to love, nurture and care for us, accepting us without question, and sharing with us our mortal journey; careers, hobbies, passions and lifestyles that offer purpose and meaning; communities, places and practices in which we are safe, and in which we find encouragement and belonging; something or someone in which to invest trust, giving us hope in the midst of the pain of illness or injury, disappointment or grief; experiences that delight our senses or emotions - that first coffee in the morning or that bit of chocolate after dinner, the physical exercise that releases endorphins to provide a natural high, a piece of music that makes us smile or weep for reasons we can't explain, the grandeur of outback wilderness, mountaintop panorama, or ocean vista. And there are more fundamental human needs – food, water and the air we breathe. Apparently, these needs can be quantified using a fairly simple formula - we can live for about 3 weeks without food, 3 days without water, and 3 minutes without air.

The primary narrative of the Hebrew Scriptures places these basic human needs within the context of faith in the God who calls people into the life of covenant relationship. Led by Moses out of slavery into freedom, the Israelites begin to regret leaving Egypt, lamenting that they've journeyed into the wilderness only to die of starvation. In response to this, the Lord provides quail for dinner and manna for breakfast. Then they complain that they're dying of thirst. In response to this, Moses is instructed by the Lord to strike the rock at Horeb, and water flows for them to drink. Moses names that place *Massah* and *Meribah*, because of the quarrelling and testing of his people when they ask - 'Is the Lord among us, or not?'

Centuries later, the apostle Paul recalls these events in a remarkable way. Writing to the church at Corinth, he interprets the Exodus narrative through the gospel of Jesus, when he says: 'I do not want you to be unaware that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and that rock was Christ.' Paul recognises that the Corinthians and the Israelites share the same struggle. This is the struggle to recognise that the Lord is indeed among them as the giver of life, not merely in the provision of food and water, but in every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord, calling people into the life of devotion, justice and peace, as creatures of God.

The writer of Psalm 104 reflects on what it means to be creatures of God: 'All things look to you Lord to give them their food in due season; when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground.' In this psalm, as in the creation story in Genesis chapter 1, the Hebrew word for spirit is *ruach* - the life-giving breath or wind of God.

In the Pentecost story in Acts chapter 2, the Greek word for spirit is *pneumatōs* - the breath or wind of God that manifests as tongues of fire resting on each of the disciples. This is the hope of Moses and the promise of Jesus fulfilled – the Spirit of God breathed into God’s people that they may dwell in praise. When the mighty acts of God are proclaimed in every language in Jerusalem, those listening are amazed, thinking that the disciples must be drunk. But the apostle Peter declares that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of an ancient prophecy - that God’s Spirit will one day be poured out on all flesh.

It’s interesting to consider Pentecost in relation to the Creedal affirmation that Jesus was ‘conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary.’ This phrase seems to cause such controversy, with some wondering how virgins can be mothers. Often overlooked are the theological implications of the phrase, perhaps especially the reference to the Holy Spirit’s role in conception. We can learn from medieval artists who recognise that Mary conceives by receiving the Word, not just through the angel’s message but through the voice of the Spirit. And just as Jesus is ‘conceived by the Holy Spirit’, so too is his church. Note the irony in Moses’ words to his agitated apprentice, Joshua: ‘Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them.’ This is the meaning and purpose of Pentecost – the Lord has put his Spirit on us to make us prophets of Jesus Christ.

Consider the brokenness that afflicts this planet and its peoples: the loss of purpose, meaning and identity that leads to despair, the struggles for power that promote the manufacture of terrible weapons, the disappearance of fertile land for subsistence farming, the deepening threat of global warming, the insatiable appetite for unsustainable consumption, the false hope in unbridled economic growth, the widening and self-justifying gap between rich and poor, the various self-serving media that sacrifice truth on the altar of greed, the hopelessness of addictions of increasing variety and misery.

Into this brokenness, the Holy Spirit breathes and speaks God’s Word of hope. This is the Spirit: who hovers over the waters of creation, bringing forth life out of darkness, who speaks through law and prophets to create a holy people, who settles on Jesus at his baptism to confirm God’s love and call, who empowers the ministry of God’s anointed in acts of healing, justice and peace, who is promised by Jesus to those who love him and obey his commandments, who is crushed by the death of the Son and the grief of the Father, who is sent upon all chaos to breathe once again life into darkness, who rejoices in the re-union of Father and Son, and invites the whole creation into God’s renewing embrace.

This is good news for a hurting world; indeed, good news that God’s creation cannot live without. This is good news for the congregation of Mark the Evangelist, as it discerns its life and witness, and journeys into a future grounded only in God’s call.

May God breathe the Spirit of Christ crucified into you, that you may be rivers of living water - as creatures of his life, as stewards of his peace, and as prophets of his glory.

Praise to the Father, Christ his Word, and to the Spirit: God the Lord. *Amen.*

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