

## The CPR of the Spirit

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab  
The Day of Pentecost, Year C. May 23, 2010.*

I wonder how many of you have had CPR training. Wow, that's great, because the Red Cross would like everybody to learn how to perform simple CPR – cardio-pulmonary resuscitation. You never know when you might be able to save another person's life. Even the few of us here who haven't taken a CPR course know something about how it works. It involves "mouth-to-mouth resuscitation." The person who is giving CPR puts his or her mouth over the mouth of the traumatized person, pinches the victims nostrils shut, and *blows* the breath of life into that person's lungs. This powerful breath gets the other person's lungs working again, and stimulation of the heart gets the heart beating again.

I'm not here to get you signed up for CPR training – though it's a fine thing – but rather to remind you of something you already know: Breath gives life; in fact, breath is life. That's the important thing to remember; because this is the day the Church celebrates the life-giving Breath of God, the Holy Spirit. And I believe the Holy Spirit wants to "give CPR" to the Church in our time. Maybe even to us! (How could *that* be???)

In the second chapter of Genesis, we read the familiar old story about God forming the first human being from the earth itself. The Bible says, "*the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.*" The Book of Acts tells us that fifty days after Jesus' Resurrection, a group of a hundred and twenty disciples were gathered in a room in Jerusalem, staying together, waiting patiently, and praying. They were doing what Jesus had told them to do. He told them to stay there in the city of Jerusalem until they received what he called "*The promise of the Father.*" He said "*John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.... You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*"

These disciples didn't really know what to expect while they were waiting and praying. They'd read that the Spirit of God filled Israel's prophets, priests, and kings long ago. But they *didn't* know exactly what Jesus had meant when he said, "*You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.*" For them, baptism meant "washing." It implied cleansing. But to be "baptized" could mean more than just a quick scrub. It also meant to be *soaked*, to be *saturated*, to be *filled up*. When the Day of Pentecost came, with the sound of rushing wind and visible tongues of fire, the Breath of God came into them, cleansed them, and filled them with new life. —But until that happened, they hadn't know what was coming.

When a priest like me talks to his congregation about the possibility of experiencing a "new Pentecost," it tends to make proper Episcopalians nervous. (And proper Presbyterians and Lutherans and other "main line" Protestants, too.) We more low-key, "reserved" Christians, we who like Bach and Handel and prefer the hymns of Ralph Vaughn Williams, get scared that if we have a "new Pentecost" and get filled with the new life of the Spirit, then we'll *lose our self-control* and maybe start behaving in embarrassing ways — doing things we don't really *want* to do. We don't want to be like those disciples in Jerusalem whose neighbors wondered whether they'd been drinking at nine o'clock in the morning.

Those of you who have taken it may remember a story Nicky Gumbel tells in the Alpha Course about an American woman who attends a Sunday service at a very traditional, rather stiff and staid English village church. There were not many people there, and it was a really "cold" service. Suddenly, right in the middle of the service, the American woman shouted out, "*Hallelujah! Praise God!*"

One of the sidesmen, as they called the ushers in Britain, came over to her right away and said, “Madam, you must not shout during the service.”

She replied, “Why not? I’ve got the Spirit!”

And he answered, “Well, you certainly didn’t get it *here!*” —I’d like for you to have the Spirit, and I’d like for you to get it here!

I like to remind my people that in his Letter to the Galatians Paul wrote that the “*fruit of the Spirit*” is: “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*” Please make a note of the last item in the list: “*self-control.*” The Holy Spirit is NOT going to make us lose control of ourselves. —But the Spirit will lead us to live our lives in a new way. —How would we like new ways of experiencing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and gentleness along with the self-control? (Do you already manifest all the patience, kindness, and goodness you’d like to? You tell me.)

OK. So if we in our little church here in Aspen are seeking the Spirit of God, earnestly, prayerfully, and faithfully, what might we expect when the Spirit comes? —Are we likely to rush out into North Street and run down to the Music Tent, speaking in unknown tongues? I would say probably *not*. (But, then, you never know!) —If not speaking in unknown tongues, then will there be some other sign? How will we *know* for sure that God’s Spirit has really come to us and a new life has begun in us? How will we know that the Holy Spirit has come “to give us CPR”?

I want to stick with the CPR analogy, because what CPR does is to get the victim breathing and his heart beating. The Holy Spirit does his biggest work in the human heart. Long before the time of Christ, when the Jews were still in captivity in Babylon, the prophet Ezekiel told them what God was going to do —and it’s one of the best descriptions of the work of the Holy Spirit there is. I want to read it to you from *The Message*, Eugene Peterson’s translation of the Bible into colloquial American English: [God says] “*I’ll pour pure water over you and scrub you clean. I’ll give you a new heart, put a new spirit in you. I’ll remove the stone heart from your body and replace it with a heart that’s God-willed, not self-willed. I’ll put my Spirit in you and make it possible for you to do what I tell you and live by my commands.*”

What will the Spirit do when he “gives us CPR”? Here’s the main thing: He’ll give us a new heart — a heart for God. If you remember, a few weeks ago I warned you about the risk we face of slipping into “functional atheism.” The risk is very apparent in our modern world, because the culture we live in teaches us — even us professing Christians — to live day-by-day without reference to God, to live as if there were *no* God or as if God were indifferent to *our* existence.

When the new life of the Spirit begins in people, they make a basic change. They start choosing to center their lives on God. Their hearts become “God-willed, not self-willed.” They look around at the world and they begin for the first time to see that God is active. Before the Spirit came, they didn’t consider that God might be doing anything at all. But once the Spirit has come and their hearts are changed, people discern that God is doing things in their lives and in the world around them all the time.

Along with the new heart that the Spirit gives, there is a new “heart knowledge” of who we are in God’s eyes. If you want to read a chapter in the Bible that will tell you a lot about the work of the Holy Spirit, I

recommend the eighth chapter of Romans. It's my favorite. We read a little bit of it this morning: *"All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For 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!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God"*

The "heart knowledge" that the Spirit gives us is the assurance that we (yes, we!) are truly God's own beloved children. We may have been told that all our lives, since we were little kids in Sunday School, but when the Spirit comes and fills us, he makes us *feel* the truth of that relationship. He makes us *feel* a kind of "heart assurance" that God is our own loving Father. "*Abba*" was a Jewish child's familiar name for Daddy. As a little child, Jesus learned to call Joseph *Abba*. And I think that when the Spirit came upon Jesus at the Jordan, when he was baptized by John, he began calling God *Abba*. When the Spirit fills us and gives us a new life, a new heart, we begin to *feel* as well as *believe* that God, the Creator and Lord of the Universe, is also our *Abba*.

When we have that kind of assurance about our relationship with God, it changes the way we pray. When people ask me to give them one thing to look for that will be a sure sign that the Spirit of God is doing his work in their life this is the one I propose. I say: If you know, when you pray, that the One to whom you are praying is your own dear *Abba*, the Father who unconditionally loves you, and you're addressing him out of the heart knowledge of that relationship, then you can rest assured that the Spirit has done his greatest possible work in your heart. *"When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God."*

Now, here's a warning. The Holy Spirit is not going to make us perfect. Not right now, not in this life. We will make moral progress under the Spirit's guidance and we will be more aware of when we're going down a wrong path, but we won't become "finished products" in this earthly life. We'll continue to be "works in progress." We'll do things we shouldn't do, and we'll fail to do some things we should have done. We'll keep needing God's forgiveness as much as God's guidance. But we won't be overcome by guilt and misery, the way we used to be, and start imagining that we're worthless and unlovable. We'll be able to accept God's forgiveness and trust that in all things – even instances of our own sin – God is able to bring about something that will ultimately be good.

If you feel like you need the CPR of the Holy Spirit, the simplest thing to do is ask. So, bow your heads and let's ask together: *Come, Holy Spirit! Breathe on us, Breath of God; fill us with life anew. We need you now. We await your coming. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Hallelujah. Praise God!