

“Inspiration Revisited”
A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRoade
The Second Sunday of Easter
April 11, 2010
Scripture: John 20:19-31

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: *Gracious God, source of our inspiration, enter into our community with the breath of your Spirit. As we hear and think about your word for us this day, let us be inspired to share your love. Amen.*

Wasn't last Sunday – Easter Sunday – inspiring? After a long forty days of preparation, of remembering and focusing on the journey of lent, suddenly it was Easter. The day was full of so much activity – special music – bustling crowds, energetic children. The story of Jesus being raised from the dead is always such good news, and it evoked deep gratitude and praise from us. We love to be inspired, don't we? We need inspiration!

So, what does it mean to you to be inspired? Most of you, I am sure, remember the pep rally assemblies in high school. Remember the football players in their letter sweaters, the cheerleaders in their bobby socks waving pom-poms, and the bands who were usually on key, but even when they weren't they were loud?! The more inspired the crowd got, the more likely it was they would come to the game, and the more likely they would be to cheer. The energy and life breathed from the crowd, in turn, was transferred to the team players so they would play their best.

There is an image of inspiration revealed in our reading from John's gospel today. Just days after Jesus was killed by the crowds, a group of his friends were together behind locked doors, nervous and fearful that Jesus' enemies might now be ready to hunt for them. Suddenly and mysteriously, the risen Christ was there, among them, greeting them with his peace. They were relieved, reenergized, rejoicing. And then, John

tells us, “he breathed on them and said to them...” Eugene Peterson's “The Message”, which is a paraphrase of the New Testament, says, “Jesus took a deep breath and breathed into them”, conveying an image of intimacy and a transference of power. He inspired them.

When God created the very first person, Genesis tells us, “the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.” Like the prophet coming into the valley of the dry bones who said, “I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live”, Jesus came into the midst of his disillusioned disciples and breathed new life into them. As fellow preacher Paul Lundborg says, “Jesus re-spired and then ex-pired, and they were in-spired!”

To be inspired is to receive breath, and – while I don't know if you are aware of it – in the language of the Bible, *breath* and *spirit* are the same word. To be enthused, in that same language, is to be in God. Inspiration and God, my friends are inextricably linked. So when the risen Christ came near his friends, his new life gave them new life. He was close to them, and they felt his breath and knew he was alive. He told them, “I'm giving you new spirit, the Holy Spirit, and this is what my spirit will do through you.”

The Bible contains other passages where Jesus entrusted important work to his followers, and these words from the Bible inform us of what we need to be doing in our world today.

Do you remember Christ's words in the Gospel of Matthew?” – The words to which we now refer as the Great Commission? “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commended you.”

And, then, probably as Christ's foremost commandment comes from John's gospel – words which Jesus gave to his disciples around the table

when they shared their last supper together, “I give you a new commandment”, he said, “that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another.”

My friends, I am not certain if the words we are hearing today could be called the “Great Gift” or the “Great Burden”, but in giving his Holy Spirit to his followers, Jesus admonished them, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

My Friends, people of God, this is your inspiration for today – an inspiration revisited. God's forgiveness of sin is mediated through you. Did you ever stop to think about that?! You have the power to announce the gift of God's forgiveness, and when you do that, forgiveness will happen.

Did you ever think that your life didn't amount to very much? Did you ever think of yourself as meaningless or of no account? Here is the power put into your hands: the power of the Holy Spirit means that when you announce God's forgiveness, sins are forgiven. When you retain the sins of any, they are retained. To forgive is to let go; to retain is to hang on. This power was given to that original group of Jesus' followers and has been handed on generation to generation to Jesus' followers today – you. Us!

I know that none of us expected to be more inspired than we were last week. But what I need for you to recognize and to understand is that the words we heard this morning are just as inspirational – if not even more so – than the words we heard last week!

Last Sunday we heard of the empty tomb. Today we hear of the risen Christ appearing to his followers, bringing these results:

- . A great peace was given to them as a sign of the new life Christ brought.

- . A purposeful mission was given to Jesus' followers.

- . The Holy Spirit, the authority and

power for that mission, was also given to Jesus' followers.

The responsibility to announce this new relationship with God through the gift of forgiveness was imparted to them.

Let us never minimize this task. As followers of Jesus in today's world, we were not sent like John the Baptist to call everyone to repentance so that we can announce their forgiveness. We are not the angry prophets proclaiming damnation to all who fail to repent. We are not the agents of gloom and doom predicting the wrath to come. Nor are we the judges who declare guilt or innocence to the crowds. We have been commissioned to speak of a forgiving God; for it is only those who will trust in that forgiveness, who will have the courage to repent.

We have heard of the God whose steadfast love endures forever, who desires that all will be saved and who come to the awareness of truth; who is slow to anger and abounding in mercy. We are to speak a word of grace to a world which knows only the vocabulary of earning and deserving.

My friends, there is not one single thing we can do which will cause God to love us more. There is not one single thing we can do which will cause God to love us less. It is God's nature to be merciful, gracious, and forgiving, and we have been entrusted with declaring that message to a waiting world.

In light of the resurrection it is our turn. We are to go seek out those who don't even know they have need of Jesus Christ and offer them the bread of life that has been given to us. Even if they have refused to come into the sanctuary, we are to go and find them amidst the toys and entertainment of this world that are so captivating and so apparently satisfying. We are to go and offer them the abundant love of God in ways that they can see and touch and taste so that they, too, will exclaim the spontaneous, "Yes!" that comes

when Jesus offers himself to us and it is undeniable that he is good – so good – and so much better than anything that surrounds us.

The empty tomb was a source of great inspiration last Sunday. Today it is the risen Christ, who is not only alive, but is bursting with gifts, bringing peace, the Holy Spirit, and the authority to announce God's forgiving peace, the Holy Spirit, and the authority to announce God's forgiveness. My prayer is that each of us would feel his breath in us today and be inspired anew. May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

Thanks to Paul Lundborg for his sermon on this text, "Inspired" and to Jill Duffield for her article, "Nursery Communion" in the April 5 edition of The Presbyterian Outlook."

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