

WGUMC June 8, 2014 Pentecost Sunday
John 3:1-8; John 20:19-23 "The Spiritual Senses"

The Gospel of John gives us an alternative story of the coming of the Holy Spirit. In John, Jesus gives the Spirit on Easter not Pentecost. In John, there is no mighty wind, no flames of fire, no foreign languages. Jesus just appears and, as he was anointed by the Spirit and sent to bring Good News to the poor, so he gives his disciples the Spirit and sends them into the world.

Jesus simply breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." So he would make this Spirit business seem as easy as breathing. Why are some of us holding our breath? I had an image come to me at Kaleidoscope Thursday night: a room full of Christians holding their breath for fear of receiving the Holy Spirit. I don't know many blue-blooded Christians, but I've seen some blue-faced ones, good people who won't breathe because they are afraid to receive because they don't want to be sent.

Nicodemus, in our other text this morning, was one of those blue-faced believers. He was holding his breath against the prospect of new birth, the risk of receiving a brand new life. After all, it was pretty harrowing the first time, so who would want to be born a second time?

To those holding their breath, John Wesley preached a sermon on Nicodemus and the new birth. And in that sermon, Wesley said that first we are born physically, but then we must be born spiritually. And just as our body has five senses to help it know things about our world, our spirit has senses to know things about God.

Now even in Wesley's day, some folks thought that he was talking woo woo. What are spiritual senses? Well, whatever they are, they don't operate apart from our physical senses. It's a way of seeing, a way of hearing. In fact, I think Wesley is talking about letting the Holy Spirit train our physical senses, raise them to the next level, so that we can use them to help

us tune into the reality of the spiritual, the presence of God.

For me, that's what it means to be born again, to have God fill up my senses ("like a night in the forest, like a mountain in springtime, like a walk in the rain...")

Even if you aren't a John Denver fan, let's practice experiencing God through all five senses. I'll have you know that you probably do it every day. The problem is that we don't have the sense to notice it.

For instance, we put a lot of stock in our eyes and ears, but in the day to day, it's amazing what we don't see and what we don't hear. Our Kaleidoscope Bible Study on Thursday nights is an attempt to train our ears to hear God's Word and our eyes to see where God is at work in our lives. When we read a passage for the first time, we listen for a word, a phrase or an image that comes to mind for us. Once we have considered the sound, the feel, the look of the words, then we

are ready to go on to encounter the Word in the words. Ask anyone who has participated in this process. It works.

Today, the kids are going to show us how it works. We're going to invite the kids to listen to the Word and draw us an image on the walls, experiencing God through hearing and seeing. Listen to this paraphrase of Acts 2:

The disciples were all in the house together. **SUDDENLY**, from out of nowhere, came the sound of a rushing mighty wind. It sounded like a huge tornado was right in the room with them!

And that isn't all . . .

They saw something that looked like flames of fire resting just above each person's head!

And that isn't all . . .

They were **all** filled with the Holy Spirit, and they **all** began to speak in other languages which they had never learned!

The noise from the wind, and from the praying, and from all the people speaking at the same time was so loud that people outside on the street down below were beginning to wonder what in the world was happening up there in that room!

People came from all around to find out what all the commotion was about. They were amazed and thought it was marvelous that they were hearing people speaking in their own language, because they knew that the people in the room were all from Galilee and didn't know any other

language except their own.

And that isn't all...

Peter stood up and started to preach to all the people standing outside. He explained to them that what they were seeing and hearing was the power of the Holy Spirit. He preached to them about Jesus, the Son of God, and about forgiveness and baptism.

And that still isn't all...

On that one day, three thousand people became believers in Jesus! HALLELUJAH!

You don't have to be reading or drawing a Bible story to hear and see God. I was in a rehabilitation center in Salmon Creek, Washington, on Tuesday to set up a Skype conference between Grace Praisewater and the members of her Tuesday morning prayer group back here in San Jose. Thanks to help from E.Clay, the video visit went without a hitch. And you should have seen the look on Grace's face when she got to see and hear her sisters in Christ. It was an experience of God when Elizabeth Williams led them all in prayer.

In the church, we are pretty good at training folks to experience God by way of seeing and hearing. That's what Sunday morning is all about. But if we only use two of our five

senses, we are missing out on a lot of knowledge of God that comes through our sense of touch and taste and smell.

Remember the disciple Thomas who had to touch the wounds of Christ before he would believe that Jesus had risen from the dead. Touch is important. That's why our prayer shawls are so appreciated because they are love you can touch; they carry prayers you can feel. Those who can't physically see or hear can still experience God through the warmth and softness of a prayer shawl. Hold one of these for a while and you'll be singing, "Surely, the presence of the Lord is in this place." [pass out shawls]

In the temple in Jerusalem the presence of the Lord was symbolized by the Bread of Presence. It was an offering to God. It was always there, sitting on a table, as if God might at any time come down and eat it. In the church, we also have special bread that symbolizes the presence of God. We set it on a table but in this case we eat it. It is our spiritual food. The

psalmist says, "O taste and see that the Lord is good." In Novato, I always made homemade bread for communion because I wanted folks to have a taste of how good the Lord is.

Of course, we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. [Matthew 4:4] And that tastes good, too. Psalm 19 says that God's commandments are "sweeter...than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb." [19:10] For better and worse, we serve a lot of sweets in church. You'd think that coffee hour was a third sacrament or that there was some kind of rule that committees couldn't meet without cookies. But you have to be careful of all those empty calories. Here's a honey stick to remind you that God is the only sweet that will ever satisfy your hunger. [pass out honey sticks]

Finally, we come to the fifth sense, the sense of smell. If this were an Orthodox Church, we could smell the incense and that would mystically transport us into God's presence. "Your

name is perfume poured out," it says in the Song of Songs.

[1:3] But we Protestants pretty much gave up on the smells if not the bells. The closest we get is when the altar is covered with lilies at Easter or when someone in the choir wears too much cologne.

But don't forget that there is one important thing that smells do for us; they help us to remember. In our brain, the olfactory bulb is right next to the hippocampus, which has a role in making memories. So particular smells can trigger powerful memories. I used to go to the tack shop in Point Reyes Station so I could smell the leather there and relive my years in Montana. Just one whiff and I was in the saddle, feeling my horse move beneath me.

I bet there is a smell that can trigger for you a memory of the presence of God. Churches have a unique smell, especially old ones. I remember my childhood church back in Iowa always smelling like dead flowers and old furniture. I would walk past

the sanctuary on Saturdays on the way to my piano lesson, and I figured that's what God must smell like. And to this day, when I walk into an old church, I have a sense of the holiness and the timelessness of God.

I don't have dead flowers, but I have some fresh ones. The fragrance of this rose reminds me of Ruby (because she always brings the roses), and Ruby always reminds me of God! So I'll pass around one of her roses. Stop and smell the rose; remember God.

Now, this all may seem kind of silly to be doing on Pentecost Sunday: passing around prayer shawls, handing out honey sticks, smelling roses. But this is to remind us that Jesus is not going to appear out of nowhere every day to breathe on us the Spirit of God. Seldom, if ever, will we hear a rushing wind and see flames of fire and speak in foreign languages. But we can receive the Holy Spirit and we can experience the presence of God in our everyday lives if we would only come to our

senses. If we would only wake up to the world. So, look, listen, touch, taste, and smell the work and the wonder of the Spirit of God. Then, wherever you are, you can fill up your senses with God and sing, "Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place."