

# The Day of Pentecost

## GOD BREATHES

**Psalms 104:24-34, 35b**

## The Day of Pentecost

**Analysis by Joseph Justus van der SABB**

*24O LORD, how manifold are your works!  
In wisdom you have made them all;  
the earth is full of your creatures.  
25Yonder is the sea, great and wide,  
creeping things innumerable are there,  
living things both small and great.  
26There go the ships,  
and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.  
27These all look to you  
to give them their food in due season;  
28when you give to them, they gather it up;  
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.  
29When you hide your face, they are dismayed;  
when you take away their breath, they die  
and return to their dust.  
30When you send forth your spirit, they are created;  
and you renew the face of the ground.  
31May the glory of the LORD endure forever;  
may the LORD rejoice in his works –  
32who looks on the earth and it trembles,  
who touches the mountains and they smoke.  
33I will sing to the LORD as long as I live;  
I will sing praise to my God while I have being.  
34May my meditation be pleasing to him,  
for I rejoice in the LORD.*

35bBless the LORD, O my soul.

**An excerpt from "The Tale of God's Hands," by Rainer Maria Rilke, 1904.**

**As translated by Gunilla Zedigh.M**

"... and God decided from thenceforth not to let earth out of His sight. And so it was.

"He left His hands – which are, after all, wise in their own right – to finish up His work, and although He was quite curious to see just how the human being would turn out, He stared unremittingly down at earth, upon which – as if out of defiance – not a single leaf was stirring.

"In order to have at least one small pleasure after all his trouble, God had commanded His hands to show Him the human being before they delivered him into life. Repeatedly, He had asked – in the way that children do when they are playing hide-and-seek – Ready? But all He had heard in reply was the sound of His hands kneading – and so He waited. It seemed to Him that it was an extremely long wait.

"Then, all of a sudden, he saw something dark fall through space – and in a direction that seemed to have come from a place very near to Him. He became filled with a dark premonition, and He called for His hands. Hot and trembling, they appeared before Him. They were no longer immaculate – they were entirely stained with clay. 'Where is the human?' God thundered at them. Whereupon, the right hand lashed out at the left hand: 'You let go of him!' 'Oh please,' the left hand replied in a vexed tone of voice. 'You insisted on doing everything yourself. You hardly let me have any say in the matter.' 'You were the one who was supposed to hold onto him in the first place.' The right hand raised itself up as if to strike, but thought better of it, and

then both hands rushed to speak first: 'He was so impatient, this human being. He was in such a hurry to live! It's not our fault! Neither one of us is to blame.'

"Our good Lord was gravely angry. And as His hands were obstructing His view of the earth, He thrust them both away from Him, and said: 'I'm through with you two. Go and do whatever you want!' And that is what the hands have tried to do ever since. However, they are only able to ever make a start at things – this is because, without God, there is no completion. Over time, His hands grew weary of this, and now they kneel down and repent the whole day through – that is the story people tell, at least. And to us, it appears as if God is resting, because He is furious with His hands – it is forever the seventh day.

"And you believe that God and His hands will never be reconciled?"

"Oh, no, I do," I replied. "At least, I hope so."

"And when will this be?"

"Well, not until God knows what the human being – whom His hands released against His wishes – looks like."

My dear neighbor gave this some thought. She then let out a laugh.

"But He could have seen him had He simply looked down..."

"Forgive me," I said politely. "Your remark certainly is evidence of your acuteness of mind, but my tale is not finished yet. Just as His hands had stepped aside, giving God full view of the earth, yet another minute – or let us rather call it a thousand years, which we all know is the same thing – had already gone by. And instead of catching sight of one human being, there were already a million of them. And they were fully

dressed, as well. All of them. And since the fashion of the time was downright ugly, and also, in fact, served to terribly disfigure their faces, God got quite the wrong – and it must be said, and extremely bad – impression of humankind.

“And therefore it is extremely important that God find out what humankind is really like. So let us rejoice in the fact that there are people who tell Him...”

My dear neighbor was not yet rejoicing.

“And who do you have in mind, if I may ask?”

“The children,” I said. “And also, every once in a while, all of the people who paint, write poetry, and build things...”

---

## **DIAGNOSIS: Can't breathe...**

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : *Uppity Stardust*  
Celebrating God for the creation, this hymn may have served as source material and inspiration for the poets of Genesis, chapter one. The metaphors and images here are quite beautiful, if a little far-fetched, something that plagues “worship music” to this very day.

Take the ‘heavens’ from stanza one, for instance. Not at all “like a tent.” What were those scribes thinking?! What we have here is obviously the atmosphere of a “Goldilocks” planet, composed of N, CO<sub>2</sub>, O<sub>2</sub>, water vapor and much else that is held against the planet’s surface by sufficient gravity. Beyond the planet’s atmosphere, well, the “heavens” are our solar system, the Milky Way galaxy and then the Local Group and then Laniakea Local Supercluster and, well, you can’t see anything much beyond that (even if you’re Abraham) without a pretty big telescope. And if there’s a divine palace orbiting Earth, you’d think we’d

have seen the golden halls by now. Or bumped into the pastel lintels on our way to walk on the moon. The water in "the deep," well, it turns out that not only is it the same water that the dinosaurs drank and peed, but it is actually a LOT older than our Sun. The atoms of carbon, oxygen, iron and hydrogen that make up our bodies... are also much older than this solar system. As for chaos, try comprehending a billion Red Giant stars going nova over a billion years and spraying the atomic bits of our unborn world into the nothingness of the expanding universe. Yet, unfathomably, that primordial exploding and coalescing was part of the chaotic journey by which we now live and breathe and have our being. As for Time, well, we have atomic clocks now. No need for the Moon (which, hello! orbits this planet) to rule the seasons and the Sun (which, hello! this planet orbits) to rule the day. The sea and old Leviathan, well... honestly... when did Moby Dick last sink Captain Ahab?

Yet... from every living machine of meat, bone and stardust, the pneuma/breath/wind/spirit that opens the machine's eyes and moves its being... departs. Is withdrawn. The flame of life flickers and is snuffed out. And, then, upon another formless speck of genes and DNA, dividing cells and amniotic fluid, pneuma alights. And it happens to the countless generations of man and mute beast, red roses and lichen, bacteria and rainforests, the hovering hummingbird and the majestic coral reefs which color the seas. They all, they each, live and move and have their being. And then, inevitably, this pneuma that gave life is withdrawn. Once again, the stardust is... just dust. Dust with another story it can never tell. What is this life, this breath, that animates the stardust into such transcendent beauty? Where did it come from? Why has it gone?

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) :** *Food in Due Season Is OK, but Actually I Want More*

This is our daily bread, our food in due season. We are given

this life, such as it is, with all that it is, out of an abundance of generosity. Though we gather it up like the sons and daughters of Israel gathering manna beneath Sinai, we can come to hold it grudgingly. It is not enough that we too breathe God's breath. It is not enough that we partake, with every single atom, in the being of the universe itself. It is not enough that we, in a very real way, speak to God on behalf of the creation. We want more. I want more. The poets of Genesis depict this as the desire to be like God, authorities unto ourselves, having our way and having our way upon others. One man, nearly two thousand years ago, said that this is like knowing the light, but choosing the darkness instead. Today's seers recognize that our self-serving pride is, even at this very moment, tearing apart the ecosphere that sustains us all in a race to have and to hold more and more in every season of the year, every season of life.

When Rilke's "good Lord" looks upon humankind now, is there any chance that He will finally find out what the human being is really like? Just what will the good Lord see when He peers at me? At you? Is the fashion of our time any less ugly? Here we are, once sublime beings of stardust and pneuma, breathing the very stuff of the heavens themselves, now desperately trying to take more than our share while knowing that others will want... while we will waste. Is our cussedness complete? The perfection of the created order, celebrated in Psalm 104, simply isn't good enough for us, is it? Who are the sinners, the wicked? I'd name them, but that I see their chief staring at me in the mirror.

**Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem)** : *Actually, Just Dust*  
It is well and good for God to renew the earth with another generation of life, but what about my generation? What about me? Is it my common lot to suffer the indignation of my breath being drawn out of me one last time, my heart stopping with a final thud, my carcass falling limp to the dust from which it arose?

Am I worth nothing more than the sparrow who likewise falls? I mean, have I not borne the seeds of unborn star systems within my brow, cast my gaze over beauty surpassing and felt my body pulse with the songs of nature's night? For something, for this, I deserve to be rewarded, to be pitied. Someone, somewhere, pay attention to me! Show me your face; for I am not ready to be nothing.

And spiritually, of course, we're even worse. The breath with which God animated the cosmos ought to have been sufficient to create in us an upright spirit, right? What do we have to say for ourselves?

This, frankly, is the bad impression the good Lord got when He peered at humankind.

## **PROGNOSIS: The Breath of Life**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** : *The Lord, the Giver of Life*

What about the Other One, you say? The Holy One? The Pneuma of the ... well... what can we append to capital P Pneuma? It's a very big word. The Pneuma of the Universe, of the Cosmos, of God? Isn't it the Breath that breathes each and every bit of it into life? Are there then two breaths that are of God? The one that generally animates life and being and the Other One who is so intrinsic and integral to God that we name it the "Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life / who proceeds from the Father and the Son / with the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified." What is this Other kind of life that God especially inbreathes? And why would the good Lord inbreathe that life to humans if He has not seen them for who they truly are, if He has not signed off on them?

Rilke, in another story, imagines that the right hand of the good Lord, the one who had done the kneading in heaven,

descended to the earth to become human. In order that the good Lord could finally look down and see what His humans truly looked like. There he was, dying on a hill, so truly human that God recognized him as being of God. So truly God that this, finally, is what the human was meant to look like! So that when we unimpressive humans look at him, we see what God looks like... and when God looks at him, he finally sees what humans were supposed to look like. And is impressed. And the Pneuma is sent into the world to renew the dust... that, taking deep gulps of this new air, drinking from this cup, we too will share in God's very life.

"We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father... Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven; by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake..."

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Living and Moving and Having Our Being IN CHRIST***

Pneuma/Spiritus/Ghost/Breath/Wind – The Lord, the Giver of Life. What kind of life? Well, animation, for one. But, in light of the Resurrection of the Son of God and his ascent to the right hand of the Father and the sending to the Church of the One who will point us always back to the grace of God in Jesus Christ, another kind of Life too. Life that's not just living and moving and having our being... but living and moving and having our being IN CHRIST. Thus is it fulfilled that "when you send forth your spirit/breath, they are created and you renew the face of the ground."

What does this mean? The Breath of new life courses in our lives, marking us as the humans who trust their good Lord for every good thing. This sets us apart from the humans who make it up and make it do, trusting in their own wisdom and strength to



struggle through to that final thud, hoping that trying hard is good enough. Satisfied now with our daily bread in every due season, the whining manipulations that come with wanting more are no longer given room to breathe and disappear. Where is that chief of sinners now? He's still there, staring at me. The stardust is the same dust as before. But the life... the breath... it begins to reflect God's life, because it is God's Breath/Spirit.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution)** : The Renewal I can't speak for mushrooms, termites, cockroaches, or even chimpanzees on the question of whether God's Pneuma animates them to participate in the renewal of this world, but ... Renewed (born again?) in the image of God, with God's Pneuma animating them, these human beings in front of you now are part of God's renewal of the stardust earth. Does this mean that we, who the good Lord made in His image and who, for our sake, became Human, now have a social responsibility toward other humans? An ecological responsibility toward the planet which we share with all the stardust beings that partake of this breath? "May the LORD rejoice in his works –" sings the psalmist, but do we also rejoice in nature? humanity? the universe? Can we? Dare we?

Rilke saw the good Lord above the earth, gazing down upon the stardust of life. He was a bit unlucky, I think, because others saw more. Ezekiel and Isaiah and Daniel and John of Patmos saw the Lord of Hosts much nearer to hand. Peter, James and John, Mary, Cleopas, saw ... well... at breakfast. At table. In the face of their friend. And they each, we each, took three deep breaths of this renewing spirit/breath ... and opened new eyes and gazed upon the pastel lintels soaring o'er the white shores... of our home.

Time to rejoice and praise God ... for all of it.