

Title: The Breath of God

Date: 5/28/2023 (Pentecost Day, Year A)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Acts 2:1-21](#); [1 Corinthians 12:3b-13](#); [John 20:19-23](#); [Psalm 104:25-35. 37](#)

Video Link: https://youtu.be/bD6_-veSnXI?t=1265

I will sing to God as long as I live;
I will praise my God while I have my being.
May these words of mine find favor;
I will rejoice in the Holy One. **Amen.**
(Ps 104:34-35, The Saint Helena Psalter)

Given the readings assigned for today, this whole week I've been thinking a lot about breath and breathing.

Not only is breathing fundamental to our continued existence, it is also fundamental to our identity as children of God. In the second account of creation, which is found in Genesis 2, God formed the first human from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the first human became a living being (Gen 2:7).

So, every time we breathe in and out, we are breathing the breath of life, the breath of God. Every time we breathe in and out, let us remember that we are more than children of earth and dust; we are children of God. Let us remember that we are more than what we appear to be, more than what we and other people may think we are.

Thinking about breathing in the Bible reminds me of one of my favorite Old Testament stories. The prophet Ezekiel recounts how God, through the Holy Spirit, brought him into the middle of a valley full of bones.

God asked him, "Mortal, can these bones live?"

He answered, "O Lord God, you know."

By the way, what a great way to answer without giving an answer,
to give an answer while leaving room for God

Now back to the story

Then God told Ezekiel, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live."

Ezekiel did as God told him, and the bones came together, then there were tendons and ligaments, then there was flesh, and finally there was skin. But they were not alive, because there was no breath in them.

Then God told Ezekiel to prophesy to the breath. So he did, and the breath came into these bodies, and they lived. They lived.

An army of the dead coming to life sounds kind of creepy, but I love this story. You and I, we too are bones and tendons and ligaments and flesh and skin. But when we hear

prophecy, we can come alive with a sense of mission and purpose. Remember, prophecy is not about predicting the future but telling the truth about the way things actually are. It shows us how things are going wrong, how we have been separated from God and are going farther away from God.

And when we are aware of the Spirit of God alive in us and in this world, we will no longer shuffle along like the living dead. When we breathe with the awareness of the Spirit of God moving in and through us, we will do more than just go along with the way things are.

Last Saturday, I watched as my mentor and friend, Matt Heyd, was ordained and consecrated as the next bishop of New York. Some of you were here last August, when Matt came to Austin for my installation, the service that officially bound us to this shared life together.

He was the preacher at that service, and like all preachers who preach a sermon that marks the new stage of a journey, he asked a guiding question. He asked, “What does the best of us look like?”

Then, like all preachers who preach a sermon that marks the start of something new, he gave us an answer that wasn't *really* an answer. That feels very Episcopalian. It was an answer that was specific enough to point us in a certain direction and broad enough that there was still stuff for us to figure out. He gave an answer that left room for us and for God.

Working off a sermon preached by Bishop Vicentia Kgabe of Lesotho, a kingdom encircled by South Africa,¹ he told us,

“The best of us looks like ALL of us.
It looks like all of us bringing our gifts;
It looks like all of us bringing our gifts to heal the world.”²

The last time I preached on the Day of Pentecost, the world was in desperate need of healing. It was 2020. This was when it was starting to sink in that the pandemic wasn't going to be over any time soon. This was the weekend after George Floyd was murdered. According to transcripts of the video, he told the police and everyone who stood there and watched, “I can't breathe.”³ He said that more than twenty times before he died.

This was not long after Breonna Taylor was murdered, which was not long after Ahmaud Arbery was murdered. China was seen as the source of the virus, and whenever China is blamed for something, I get nervous, because well (point to face). There was a lot of trauma, a lot of grief.

It was getting hard to breathe, but at least I was breathing. I still remember the sound of helicopters flying overhead late into the night and into the early hours of the morning, as I sat there and struggled to find words to speak with the breath that I had.

This Pentecost, the world is still in desperate need of healing; it is in desperate need of our gifts. This year, it falls right after the one-year anniversary of the shooting in Uvalde. Ever since 19 children and two adults were killed at Robb Elementary School,⁴ families have been mainly pressing Texas lawmakers for regulations that would raise the minimum age for buying firearms.⁵ They have used their breath to speak out, to keep the conversation going so that we're still talking about what happened and so that they can prevent this from happening in other places, to other families.

This year, Pentecost falls close to the end of a legislative session in Texas that makes it harder for certain people to breathe. I know of at least three households with a trans person that are moving to places where they can breathe more freely. Some doctors working in reproductive health feel like they cannot speak up and advocate for their patients' health as they once could.

Here and in other states around the country, legislatures are trying to take the air out of discussions about gender and sexuality, race and diversity, history and equality, or the lack thereof. This is about uniformity, not unity. This is not about celebrating what we have in common, but stifling what makes us different. This is not about safeguarding; this is about suffocating.

In the face of all this, how do we breathe?

According to today's gospel, the good news is that when the disciples hid behind locked doors out of fear, Jesus met them where they were. He stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he showed them his hands and his side, showing them that even after all that suffering and death, he was still here. He was still with them. He said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Then he breathed on them and told them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." (Jn 20:19-23).

When the disciples were afraid, when they might have had trouble breathing as we tend to when we are filled with fear or anger, anxiety or grief, Jesus blessed them with peace.

He wished them peace and reminded them that with each breath they take, they are taking in the breath of God. With each breath they take, they are also being filled with the Holy Spirit.

As we see in the book of Acts, the Spirit gave the disciples ability. It gave them the ability to speak in the native language of all those Jewish pilgrims. They had come from all around the world to celebrate the feast of Weeks, the feast that commemorated the giving of the Torah,⁶ and now they received the news that God will pour out Holy Spirit on all flesh, that regardless of gender, age and class, all shall prophesy.

In the first letter from Paul to the Corinthians, he makes it clear that not only are there a variety of gifts, to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. This is the same Spirit that, in the opening verses of Genesis, was a mighty wind from God that swept over the face of the waters. With the Spirit of God and the Word of God,

God spoke creation into being. So, whether our gift is to heal, to share knowledge or wisdom or faith, to work miracles, or to speak prophecies or something that has not being named yet, with every breath of God's we have the potential to be co-creators with God.

Last Saturday, at Matt's ordination and consecration as bishop, the preacher was the Very Rev. Kelly Brown Douglas, the dean of the Episcopal Divinity School. In her sermon, she called on us to conspire with God.⁷

When she said "conspire," my breath caught in my throat. That word led me to think of conspiracy theories. My mind went to the insurrection at the Capitol on January 6, 2021. My mind went to all the ways Christianity and church has been used not to safeguard, but to suffocate.

Then she specified that she was talking about con-spire, as in breathing together. She said to conspire is to join with another to make something that is difficult come to be.

She said, every time we take a breath, we are inhaling what we need to conspire with the Spirit that is God coursing through our time so that we can join with God and make real, in this our time, at least a glimpse of God's future where no one is deprived of the abundance they need to live and to thrive.

She said, if we breathe, then we have no excuse or not conspiring with God to create a more just future where all God's people can be free from that which would indeed deny their very sacred breath of life.

In a moment, we will renew our baptismal vows. These vows point us toward what it looks like for us to conspire with God, to breathe with God.

Let's take a moment to close our eyes and breathe deeply.

With every breath, let us remember that this is the breath of God. With every breath in, we receive the Holy Spirit. With every breath out, we share the gifts of the Spirit.

May the Holy Spirit help us come alive and come together so that we might gather our gifts to help heal the world.

Amen.

¹ <https://livingchurch.org/2022/07/31/lambeth-opening-service-marked-by-praise-division/>

² Matt's sermon <https://youtu.be/AlBugeQ8Om4?t=2325>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jul/08/george-floyd-police-killing-transcript-i-cant-breathe>

⁴ <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2023/05/25/episcopal-church-in-ualde-texas-observes-one-year-mark-since-elementary-school-mass-shooting-with-butterfly-release-art-therapy/>

⁵ <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2023/05/ualde-shooting-anniversary-robb-victims-parents-texas-legislature.html>

⁶ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/2023/05/25/shavuot-2023-what-is-it-when-is-it-meaning-of-jewish-holiday/70247170007/>

⁷ <https://vimeo.com/829951624?fbclid=IwAR1ZRk2g0UDHtQrKjI-TTkHXIMGXjKC83DIhUj5m8iohv3zS2tEZx2SfrQ>