

Acts 2:1-21
Romans 8:26-27

Psalm 104:1, 3b-4, 24, 30-31, 33, 35b-c
John 15:26-27; 16:13-14

5/20/18—Pentecost Sunday B

Holy Breath

What are you doing right now? You're sitting in a pew. You're listening to the beginning of a sermon. Maybe you're thinking about what to have for lunch. But you're doing something else, too. Something you might not even realize you're doing until you hear it mentioned.

It's *breathing*! Breathing is a bodily function that—most of the time—you do unconsciously, without even being aware of it. But you also have a measure of control over it. When singers offer us the wonderful gift of their voices, they breathe during rhythmic pauses in the music. Swimmers, too—between strokes—are intentional about breathing. And when you go for your annual physical—like I will this week—you'll probably think about breathing when you're asked to take some deep breaths so your doctor can listen to your heart and lungs through a stethoscope.

But do you ever feel like you can't *catch* your breath? If so, it might be because you've been running like a hamster on a

wheel. Maybe not *literally* running, but running incessantly from one activity or task to the next. Trying to get the maximum number of things crossed off your to-do list in the shortest possible amount of time. Trying to multi-task. You get stressed. You get tired. You're out of breath. You need to come up for air. You need to inhale. And exhale. You need to breathe deeply. A good place to do that is right here in God's house. Where, today, we celebrate Pentecost Sunday.

We're all together in this one place, just as a hundred and twenty followers of Jesus were all together on the Day of Pentecost. When they heard a sound like rushing wind, and were breathed on by the breath of God. Did you know that the word for *breath* also means *spirit* in the original biblical languages? In Hebrew, it's *ruach*. In Greek, it's *pneuma*. The Holy Spirit is holy breath. God's breath. God's Spirit that comes down at Pentecost.

Pentecost, which means *fiftieth day*, has its roots in the early tradition of God's people Israel, coming fifty days after the deliverance of Passover. Pentecost began as a spring harvest festival when all the people came together to renew their connection to one another and their covenant relationship with

God. And to celebrate the giving of the law to Moses at Mount Sinai—where God’s presence is signaled by flames of fire.

And fifty days after the resurrection of Jesus, who promised this fire, the fiery presence of God the Holy Spirit descends on believers in Jerusalem, where dispersed Jews from every nation have gathered for Pentecost.

But this day isn’t the first time we hear of God’s eternal Spirit. The Spirit sweeps over the waters of chaos at creation. The Spirit overshadows Mary, and she conceives in her womb. The Spirit alights upon Jesus at his baptism. The Spirit anoints him as God’s chosen One.

This Holy Spirit, this holy breath, gives life. “There are any number of spirits that we can breathe in,” as one interpreter puts it. “But [although] some spirits can *consume* our lives, only the Holy Spirit of God will finally *bring* us true life.” This Spirit is the Giver of life.

God’s Spirit breathes the breath of life into the first human. Breathes life into *every* living creature, as the psalmist sings. The Spirit even breathes life into the despondent, good-as-dead exiles of Israel. In a hymn we sang recently, Charles Wesley prays, “Breathe, O breathe thy loving Spirit into every troubled breast!”

With holy breath our God inspires sacred Scripture, both in the writing of it and in the reading and hearing of it. When you say to yourself: *Wow—that Bible passage really spoke to me!*, you have been given the awareness that the Word is Spirit-filled. Inspired. You have received the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

With holy breath God speaks through prophets of long ago and prophets of our own time, too. And the Holy Spirit prays for you when words won't come. When you feel helpless and hopeless, the Spirit breathes a breath-prayer. Interceding, pleading for you. When disappointment and desperation and despair have brought you down into the depths of a place where you can't remember how to pray, the Spirit does it for you. When you can't pray because you're so full of tears that all you can do is weep, the Spirit is in that place *with* you. Breathing and groaning and sighing prayers *for* you.

The Spirit speaks for you and speaks *to* you in so many ways. The Spirit testifies to the truth of Jesus Christ and guides you into that truth. The Spirit declares the things of Christ and the things that are to come. The Spirit convicts, converts, and comforts. And the Spirit teaches! Jesus assures you that *when they bring you before...the rulers and the authorities, [you] do*

not [need] to worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say.

God's Spirit. God's breath. Letting you know that God is closer even than your own breath.

It's breath, of course, that makes speech possible. When you breathe out, air passing through your vocal cords enables speech. Speech is borne on breath.

At Pentecost, holy breath makes it possible for disciples of Jesus to speak. The Holy Spirit comes to an assortment of ragtag, uneducated Galileans—timid, fearful individuals who've scattered at the first sign of danger. And the Spirit changes them, radically changes them into a company of apostles who dare to continue doing what Jesus did. Who boldly announce his coming kingdom and the good news it brings, with every breath they take.

Holy breath makes possible the Pentecost miracle of believers' speaking in languages they've never studied and never before spoken. Real, intelligible languages. Have you ever been to a worship service conducted in a foreign language? A language you did not understand? If you have, that service

probably was not as meaningful to you as it otherwise might have been. But at Pentecost, people from every corner of empire—from every place in the known world—experience the wonder and the joy of being able to listen and comprehend.

The miracle of Pentecost is that *all* of God's children, no matter what they look like—or what country they hail from—hear in their own language the great glad tidings of God's mighty acts in Jesus Christ. Our God has made each human being unique. Our God has created marvelous cultural and ethnic diversity. We celebrate the beauty of this diversity. And we celebrate unity!

Unity happens when each one can hear and understand the gospel in his or her own native tongue. That's why the Bible is published in so many different languages—for all believers to read. Believers who become the Body of Christ—one body, worshiping and serving one Lord. You and I and all who follow Jesus, all around the world, become church! At Pentecost, holy breath breathes life into the church. At Pentecost, the Spirit births the church into being.

But Pentecost isn't just something that happened two thousand years ago. Pentecost isn't just a one-time, long-ago

event from which all the excitement has long since faded away. The excitement of Pentecost is right here, right now. The gift of Pentecost is right here, right now. The Spirit of Pentecost is right here, right now. For the Holy Spirit is the divine presence in your life and mine. The Holy Spirit is God in action—the living, breathing God at work in the world today.

Descending on a collection of ordinary individuals like you and me. Breathing life into us when we're all together in one place. Making us community! Gifting us with Spirit power to testify with courage and to proclaim the blessed resurrection and the everlasting reign of Jesus Christ.

Making us church! Making possible your ministry and my ministry and the ministry of all believers. Enlivening, empowering all that the church is and does and will be. By the leading of God's Spirit, the holy breath of God, we are the church! And we are on a mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ—so that the world *will* be transformed! So that all people—everyone, everywhere—who call on the name of the Lord will know the amazing, saving grace of God.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.