

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
28 May 2023

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Pentecost Sunday

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Don’t Forget to Breathe”

Acts 2:1-21; Romans 5:1-11

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

*(Holding yoga pose on center
chancel: Utkatasana – chair pose)*

“Don’t forget to breathe.”

This is what my yoga teachers say when we are holding a challenge physical posture. Moments before the whole study was calm, cool and collected – breathing smoothly with inhales and exhales, but all the sudden now it’s silent. We’ve stopped breathing. Somehow when our muscles are burning and shaking we stop breathing. We think that by holding our breath it will make the time go faster or the posture get easier. Neither is true, of course. Ironically, the only thing that makes a challenging pose in yoga easier is if you breathe. *(Especially if you’re holding it in high heels! Whew!)*

(walk to pulpit)

I wonder – in a practice like yoga which is *all about* breath – if I have to be frequently reminded “*Don’t forget to breathe*” – then where else in

my life am I holding my breath without even knowing it?

Where else am I constricting within myself or suffocating in others air, spirit, or life which is meant to flow freely?

Most of the time, are not even aware of our breath. Our bodies are miraculously designed so that the *most important thing* that we do all day...we do without even thinking about it. From the moment we leave the womb as an infant with that first inhale of air, that first gasp of a cry – if we are healthy, our bodies just naturally know how to breathe.

But somewhere along the way – maybe in our first swim lessons or in our first feelings of anxiety before a big test or a big game or perhaps even in that crazy childhood myth that tells you what to do to avoid back luck if you’re driving past a graveyard – we learn to hold our breath. And at a certain point as we hold our breath, or experience

shortness of breath, we learn that lack of breath can be scary.

Breath is life. This is so basic a fact, so universal a truth, that it transcends differences in gender, ability, socio-economic level, race, orientation, land, politics, custom, or culture. Everyone knows that to breathe is to live. It is a reality that every single human shares.

Perhaps this is why three years ago this very week, following the 9 minute 29 seconds of kneeling on the neck of George Floyd – a lethal act that extinguished the breath from a man as he cried out, “*I can’t breathe*” – that an estimated 25 million people took the streets in the United States to protest and cry out for justice. The marching was not just here in the U.S. In 2,000 cities and towns in over 60 countries worldwide,¹ hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets to use the air in their lungs to cry out for the breath that George Floyd no longer had in his body.

George Floyd was not the first black man to have been killed by law enforcement, nor was he the last. So what was it about his

death that ignited this outrage, sparking the largest social justice movement in our country to date? Well, it was, in large part, the manner of his death. It was not a gun shot, which is a violence we are desensitized to, but rather a human being kneeling on the neck of another human being and not relenting even as he cried out for his momma. There was something far worse than oxygen being suffocated in this scene. The deprivation of our humanity was on full display. Our ability to disconnect from one another and dehumanize each other revealed that were collectively holding our breath as a country – our systems of oppression kneeling on the air pipe of freedom and liberation for all.

And, of course, it was all intensified by the fact that it was the height of the pandemic, and tens of thousands of people were dying in hospitals around the world from COVID – because they could not breathe either. In May 2020 we were reminded of just how precious breath is – and that is more than just “our right” to be able to breathe – it is the most basic and essential part of our creation and our humanity. We realized that

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Floyd_protests
(accessed on May 28, 2023)

we can look at someone and think: *“I have absolutely nothing in common with you, I can’t find one thing to agree with you on, you look different, talk different, walk different, believe different”* – but in those moments that filled 9 minutes and 29 seconds we were reminded, *“oh but it does not matter how different I am from you...I am human, you are human and we all breathe the same air.”*

Breath is life. When we stop breathing, we cease living.

And what is true for our bodies, is true for our souls.

Both the story Luke recalls in Acts 2 and the truth that Paul teaches in Romans 8 are *spiritual* reminders for the people of God: *“Don’t forget to breathe.”*

The same divine breath and Spirit that was exhaled over the swirling waters at creation, (Genesis 1:2) – is the same divine breath and Spirit that breathed life into the nostrils of man formed from the dust of the ground (Genesis 2:7) – is the same divine breath and Spirit that kept the fire in the burning bush aflame in Exodus so that Moses could hear from the Lord

“I AM who I AM” (Exodus 3:3) – is the same divine breath and Spirit that swept over the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel making dead people dance alive again (Ezekiel 37:9-10) – is the same divine breath and Spirit that the resurrected Jesus breathed onto his anxious, huddled disciples as they were locked up in a room, saying “Peace be with you” (John 20) – is the same divine breath and Spirit that came down as a mighty rushing wind and tongues of fire at Pentecost in Acts igniting the baptism of 3,000 and the birth of the Church (Acts 2) – is the same divine breath and Spirit that, in Romans, the Apostle Paul says intercedes for us with sighs and groanings too deep for words (Romans 8).

Alpha and Omega, beginning to end, *Ruach* in the Hebrew, *Pneuma* in the Greek – the breath and Spirit of God infuses all of creation and if we are not conscious of this Divine Breath flowing through us and around us – we will spend the entirety of our lives holding *our breath* – anxious and afraid, skeptical of hope, unconscious of beauty, and devoid of gratitude. But lest we feel this way today, Pentecost rains down as a reminder from on high, *“Don’t forget to breathe.”*

My dear ones, anxious and afraid though you are, weary and worn down as the world has made you – *“Don’t forget to breathe”* says our God.

Breathe out all that weighs you down in your sinking spirit and breathe in the life force of the Holy Spirit – which is the energy of God at work in creation, in Christ, in the world, and in your life.

There may be subtle reminders of God’s breath scattered all throughout scripture, but on Pentecost God says, *“I’m tired of being subtle; I need you to see, that even though my physical presence in the form of Jesus is no longer with you here on earth. you have something within you and around you that is far reaching and far more lasting – the very breath and Spirit of my essence So breathe deep.”*

I love that the Narrative Lectionary pairs two contrasting images of the Holy Spirit for us today on Pentecost.² In Acts 2, there are devout people of faith who were all together in one place – grieving the fact their leader was no longer with them

and wondering, anxious and afraid, how long they might endure the cruelty of Roman rule. The Holy Spirit rushes into them and onto them, causing them to speak in different languages, and the real miracle is that the crowds of people – who are from at least 15 or 16 different countries and dialects – each hear all this commotion and they understand what is being said as if their own native language was being spoken.

In other words, the Holy Spirit becomes the Great Translator so that the Good News is heard in a way that each person needs to hear it. And yes, amazed though they are, it confuses them, causing them to ask: *“What does this mean?”* (Acts 2:12).

Peter begins to preach about visions and dreams and hopes, and by the end of the second chapter of Acts 3,000+ people have been baptized and folks are worshipping and gathering in one another’s homes – sharing in common their possessions, giving to the poor, breaking bread together, singing together, praying together. In Acts 2, the Spirit of God breathes into the people a breath so fiery with

² Today, by the way, is the final day of our four years journeying through the Narrative Lectionary. Can you believe? We may one day return to it again – but for

today we say thank you to its creators for allowing us to enter the Story of God and God’s People in such an intentional and creative way.

inspiration that as they inhale its goodness it inflames in them a passion for their faith that draws them together in community. It is the “spiritual high” of all “spiritual highs.”

They inhale deeply of the glory of God. They have gone from asking, “*What does this mean?*” to sharing the meaning they have found in Christ with others – forming communities that become churches – that spread and spread all the way to 6500 E. Girard Ave. here at Calvary Baptist Church of Denver today. This is why Pentecost is called the “birthday of the church.” If the moment George Floyd lost his breath sparked a worldwide social justice movement, on Pentecost, the moment the people of God breathed in the breath of God sparked a worldwide church-forming movement.

If you recall the energy of those marching in the streets throughout the summer of 2020, that is a picture of what the energy of Pentecost might have looked like, albeit on a smaller scale. But just as the marches in the summer of 2020 eventually waned, so too, did the Pentecost Spirit of Acts.

By the time Paul is writing to

the Romans, a church he did not found and had not yet visited, the people are weary and afraid once again. The candles on their birthday cake are long extinguished. They’re still suffering under Roman occupation, they are looking around at creation and seeing it crumbling under human rule, and many people they know have died because of their faith, and in this moment, Paul writes to them saying, “*Don’t forget to breathe.*”

Now this breath is not about a sweeping exhale of God’s energy onto a crowd to ignite passion. Rather, this breath is an indwelling of God’s spirit from within...the Spirit that, when we are weary and worn down and do not even have the words to pray, intercedes for us with “*sighs and groanings too deep for words,*” (Romans 8:26-27).

In Romans 8, just as in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit is a Translator of Understanding. This time though, the translation is not about helping humans understand other humans. No, this time, the Spirit is translating *our own* unintelligible internal sighs and soul-sufferings into prayer, so that we can be assured that God hears our pain and understands our

circumstances even if we don't understand them ourselves or even know how to begin to put into words what we are feeling.

Romans 8 is a healing passage. It assures us that if we can sigh, we can pray. If we can groan, God will get us. To know that the Spirit speaks through us and for us, when we ourselves have no words left to say and that when sentences cannot be formed that would befit our pain – the Spirit is still there hearing, translating, speaking...well, that is after all, something to celebrate. It is deeply consoling.

If Acts 2 is a reminder to inhale the Breath and Spirit of God in a way that ignites, impassions, and inflames our life of faith together in community, then Romans 8 is a reminder to exhale the Breath and Spirit of God that lives within us in a way that allows our pain to be voiced in prayer our sufferings to be released through our sighs.

On this Pentecost Sunday, we are reminded that the Breath and Spirit of God is both inhale and exhale, both communal and individual, both glorifying and groaning. Our lives are never one or the other. They are both/and. We are always in the rhythm of inhaling and

exhaling. We experience seasons of passion and excitement and togetherness in our faith, and seasons of deep questioning, woundedness, suffering, and isolation.

And just as the people of Pentecost asked, "*What does this mean?*", the Apostle Paul asks, "*What then are we to say about these things?*" or "*What's the point?*"

The point, Paul says, is that *Nothing* – no sickness or illness, no affliction or agony, no poverty or peril, no stressor or suffering, no violence or persecution, no human ruler or regime, no person or system of power that traps you in its web, no height of success or happiness, no depth of failure or depression, nothing that is happening in our life today (no matter how bad it is) and nothing you anxiously worry about that might happen in your future, nothing in your dying or in your living – nothing in all of creation – can separate you from the love of God in Christ. (*para, Rom. 8:37-29*). NOTHING. Period end of sentence.

"Don't forget to breathe."

Because if you do – the air you are missing out on is Love. The

Love of God. The Love of Others. The Love of Self-Acceptance. The Love that is within each of us, producing good...which is a more accurate translation of the Greek in verse 28, by the way. Not that “*all things work together for good for those who love God*” but rather “*the Spirit works within those who love God to produce good.*”³ Big difference. God’s love doesn’t protect us from bad things happening to us. Yet when bad things happen to us, and that they will, God’s love is there within us, working to heal us and create something good – even if it’s years in the making.

As Father Richard Rohr says, God’s love, the Holy Spirit, is as near to us as our breath.⁴

If you’ve ever ridden on the subways in London, before the doors open and you get out of the train, they say, “Mind the gap.” It’s written in big words in front of every door: “Mind the gap.” It means, of course, that there are a few inches between the doors and the sidewalk, and they don’t want anyone to fall in that gap.

In teaching on the Holy Spirit, what we need to do is “mind the gap”—because the Holy Spirit fills the gaps of everything.

First, we need to be aware that there usually is a gap. There’s a space because we don’t recognize that God is as available to us as our breath. We allow God, by our own silliness and stupidity, to be distant, to be elsewhere. We always find a gap between ourselves and our neighbor, between ourselves and almost everything. We therefore feel quite lonely and isolated in this world. Without some awareness of the Holy Spirit’s presence, frankly, we’re not connected to anything or anybody. We just live an isolated life.

*The Holy Spirit within us is the desire inside all of us that wants to keep connecting, relating, and communing. It isn’t above us. It isn’t beyond us—it is within us. It’s as available as our breath...”*⁵

When George Floyd was murdered, we were reminded collectively as a nation and

³ Donghyun Jeong, “Commentary on Acts 2:1-4; Romans 8:14-39,” *Working Preacher* (28 May 2023), accessed on May 28, 2023 at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/nothing-can-separate-us-2/commentary-on-acts-21-4-romans-814-39-2>.

⁴ Richard Rohr, “As Close as Our Breath” *Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditation from the Center for Action and Contemplation* (28 May 2023), accessed on <https://cac.org/podcasts/pentecost-sunday-divine-sparkplug/> on May 28, 2023.

⁵ Rohr, *ibid.*

world what happens when we *forget to breathe*, when we normalize this “gap” – when things like institutionalized violence and systemic racism and desensitization to the miracle of created life causes us to forget that our breath is our common bond as humanity.

On Memorial Day, we do our best to do the opposite, to remember the common bond of our humanity, and to remember those who lost their lives as they tried to preserve life. War is so tragically paradoxical in that way. Killing in the name of living. But I think we know that...which is why we try so hard to create meaning out of all of the loss. It is how we find our breath in the midst of suffocating circumstances.

“The Memorial Day holiday grew out of the Civil War, as Americans — Northern, Southern, Black and white — struggled to honor the staggering numbers of dead soldiers, at least 2 percent of the U.S. population at the time.”⁶

“Historians say the first widely held commemoration of Decoration Day, which would

come to be Memorial Day, was in 1868 when General John Logan...called for a national holiday to remember the Civil War dead whose bodies lay in almost every city, village and churchyard in our country and therefore issued an order to ‘strew with flowers or otherwise decorate the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country.’”⁷

There are a few other, less widely known accounts, that claim to be the birthplace of the holiday. “One comes from Boalsburg, Pennsylvania, where in October 1864, three women are said to have placed flowers and wreaths on the graves of men who had died serving the Union during the Civil War.”⁸

Is that not reminiscent of the three women walking to the tomb of Jesus to anoint his body on Easter morning? Amazing. Now listen to this other, even *earlier* observance of Memorial Day, for how it might be reminiscent of Pentecost!

“In May 1865, just after the war ended, a large procession was held in the ruined city of Charleston, S.C. There,

⁶ Livia Albeck-Ripka, “The Tangled Roots of Memorial Day and Why It’s Celebrated,” *The New York Times* (26 May 2023), accessed on May 27, 2023 at

<https://www.nytimes.com/article/memorial-day-history.html>.

⁷ Albeck-Ripka, *ibid*.

⁸ Albeck-Ripka, *ibid*.

thousands of Black Americans, many of whom had been enslaved until the city was liberated just months earlier, commemorated the lives of Union captives buried in a mass grave at a former racecourse, [which was part of a plantation]. The service was led by some 3,000 [black] schoolchildren carrying roses and singing the Union marching song “John Brown’s Body.” Hundreds of women followed with baskets of flowers, wreaths and crosses, according to historical accounts.”⁹

Perhaps it should not surprise us that those who have lived the oppression of enslavement and then experience the liberation to breathe freely are the ones who must remind us all, “*Don’t forget to breathe.*”

Perhaps it should not surprise us that children and women, those with less power and privilege, are the ones who led this march singing, “*Don’t forget to breathe.*”

Perhaps it should not surprise us that it is following a war, when lives have been violently lost, that people gather in droves (in the Pentecost number of 3,000

no less) to honor the dead they did not know, each wreath and cross set down atop a grave a reminder to us all, “*Don’t forget to breathe.*”

Without breath, we do not have life. And without God, we do not have breath.

This Pentecost, may our inhales and our exhales mirror the rhythm of the Holy Spirit. We need both the inhale of the Acts 2 swirling Spirit of God that gives us passion, purpose, and draws us together in community, AND the exhale of the Romans 8 groaning Spirit of God that shapes our suffering sighs into prayer. Both are necessary for hope.

The Spirit of Pentecost is one of glorifying and groaning – and everything in between.

Wherever you are in life – God is. The Holy Spirit – whether stirring you up or simmering you down – is as near to you as your breath.

“*Don’t forget to breathe.*”

Inhale/exhale

Amen.

⁹ Albeck-Ripka, *ibid.*