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## **Breath**

This morning we continue our Lenten journey of listening for the still small voice of God speaking to us through prayer and quiet reflection. We began last week by talking about our caves - those places where we feel closest to God, where we can go and quiet the noise, listening for the voice of God. Throughout this Lenten series, we'll explore different spiritual practices in and outside of worship, and try new things, different ways of praying and reading scripture- seeking a deeper connection with God. .

This morning , we will be exploring the connection between our prayer life and our breathing. Our sacred texts connect the breath of God with our own aliveness—God blew breath into us at creation and we continue to breathe all of creation in and out of our bodies constantly. How might the meditative practice of paying attention to our breath be, in and of itself, a prayer of connection to God? In our worship today, I invite you to breathe deeply of the Spirit of God, which is surely among us here in this space, and may you be inspired to see this simple gift of breath in a whole new way.

Psalm 33: 3-6, 20-22

Sing to him a new song; play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.  
For the word of the Lord is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness.  
He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord.  
By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth.  
Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and shield.  
Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name.  
Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us, even as we hope in you.

Romans 8: 26-30, 38-39

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined

he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

When was the last time you took a breath? Silly question, right? Obviously, right now... and again... and again. Breath is necessary for life! But when was the last time you **thought** about breathing –about the way you breathed, or how your very breath gives you life? Breath is something we usually take for granted... that is, until we get a bad cold. It seems strange that something we do approximately 26,000 times a day takes place largely outside our conscious awareness. Unless we suffer from asthma or another respiratory condition, we'll probably spend no time today worrying about missing any of these breaths, and little to no time giving thanks for them.

In the creation story, God took the dust of the earth and shaped and formed it into the human form and God breathed the breath of life into it. This breath, the *Ruach*, the Spirit of God, is the same that fills our lungs today. That, without which, we return to mere dust. We have been breathed into by the Creator of the universe. For thousands of years, people have understood that this physical breath that we all possess is a picture of a deeper reality. In our scriptures, the word for breath is the same as the word for Spirit. In the Hebrew language of the Old Testament, it's the word *Ruach*, in the Greek of the New Testament, it's *Pneuma*. One scripture says, that when God takes away the *Ruach* from all living creatures, then they die and return to the dust, but when God sends the *Ruach*, the Spirit, they are created. Breathe, Spirit, same word. The first Christians took hold of this idea and took it further, they actually believed that the Spirit of God, the *Pneuma*, resides, could actually dwell, in a person.

The great contemplative mystic Thomas Merton was asked—one too many times—about his life and practices at The Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. Tersely Merton responded, "What I wear is pants. What I do is live. How I pray is breathe." Merton's observation may betray a note of exasperation, but it also reveals wisdom. For Merton, experiencing the Holy Spirit is a daily experience, even a moment-by-moment experience, in which the Holy Spirit is as present—and constant—as breathing.

If we became more aware of our breath, the *Ruach*, the *Pneuma* – that inspires our very life, would we become more aware of God's actual presence—the Holy Spirit—in our everyday living? We talk about prayer as a time to connect with God, to open a conversation with the divine presence that is always with us, ready to listen. A time to listen for God's leading in our lives.... could that time of prayer REALLY be as simple as breathing, recognizing that Spirit is as close to us as the breath in our lungs?

In our scripture this morning, we heard that the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought... For as much and as often as I pray, individually and communally, I still have a hard time praying sometimes... I don't always know the right words to say, what to bring to God and what to take on myself, what exactly to listen for in the

silence... But this scripture reminds me that when the words fail... I can trust in my very breath as a prayer.

I have always been a deep breather... I think it started in my adolescence when I struggled with low iron (*breathe deeply*) and my body satisfied it's craving for oxygen with deep inhales... I didn't think about it much, but after each deep, gulping breath, I would feel refreshed, renewed, and ready to get back to the task at hand. I have continued this practice of deep breathing – whether consciously or unconsciously – so that it is simply the way I breathe.... One of my confirmands in my previous church even asked his mom if I had a breathing problem. I love to take deep breaths – I feel that physically and spiritually, they connect me to the power, strength, calming presence of the *Ruach*, the Holy Spirit of God. When I'm most stressed, feeling powerless, or nervous about something, I intentionally breathe deeply – from deep within my stomach – pulling in as much of that divine breath as I can muster, and hold it in. And it is in those deep breaths that I feel the calm, the reassurance, and the strength of the Spirit wash over me. And as I release this breath, I imagine my tension and anxiety slipping out of my body, the negative thoughts and fears floating away into the air as I release them.

Scientifically, we breathe in that which we need to survive. Our bodies need the oxygen from the air we breathe to process the energy stored in the food we eat into usable energy – without breathing, we are unable to make that transaction occur and our bodies shut down because the simplest functions cannot happen... it is like a power outage that wipes out our energy source. We cannot survive without breath. On the other hand, as we breathe out, the excess materials and waste that is produced from this energy transfer is released, sent back out into the universe to keep it from building up within and poisoning us.

Using this scientific process that accompanies each breath as metaphor, we need to breathe in the good, life sustaining Spirit of God that transforms our potential into action for our daily living in the world. And just as we breathe out the carbon dioxide and other unneeded garbage produced within our bodies, we need to breathe out the emotional and spiritual junk, the negativity – and if we don't, they will poison us... blocking us from receiving the good and refreshing Spirit of God. Breathe in the good and out the bad. In the Spirit, and out toxic emotions and thoughts.

This breath prayer is one that everyone can try, for everyone breathes. We'll get a chance to practice paying attention to our breath in our prayer time today, but I invite you to try this on your own each day this week, to spend five or ten minutes simply breathing as part of your prayer routine. Breathe in God's Spirit, welcoming that Spirit into both your body and your soul. Then as you exhale, let go of the junk you've been holding onto and place your hopes and dreams in God's hands. For as the scripture says, the

*The Pneuma (breath) helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very breath intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the breath, because the breath intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.*

Take a deep breath in. Now exhale. Breathe in . . . and out. May the presence of God feel as close to you as your very breath, filling you with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit each moment of the day. Amen.