

Breathe When the Spirit Says Breathe
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Psalm 104:1-13; Acts 2:1-4

Let us pray... *Come, Holy Spirit, fill our lungs, our souls, our lives with your breath of courage and good news. May we be open to your newness. Amen.*

Do you ever catch yourself needing to remember to breathe?

I know, at first it sounds strange, and maybe even a little bit silly. If we are lucky enough to be in good health, breathing is pretty automatic.

Sometimes I go through periods in my life when I begin to sigh a lot... loud, dramatic sighs. My son is the one in my family who picks up on it... *"Mom, do you know how much you do that?"* he'll say.

When we feel stress, we tend to breathe very shallow breaths and only fill a small portion of our lungs. It is so much healthier and beneficial for all of our body's processes, systems and organs, to fill our lungs and bring air deep down into them. This drives more oxygen into the body which cleanses the blood, which in turn benefits everything else.

Luckily our bodies can do some incredible things. Like make up for the lack of oxygen we may need by sighing... literally forcing us to take a deep breath.

I wonder if some of you forget to breathe deep too. We go from task to task, from stress to stress, from activity to activity, from need to need. And before we know it, we are simply breathless. Life has socked us in the gut, and we forget to breathe.

At the moment of that first Pentecost, the disciples were probably quite breathless too. Remember all that has happened in the last 50 days for them... Jesus' arrest and brutal crucifixion: an event accompanied by loud sighs and long wails of grief. Then, a ray of hope as three days later the resurrection appearances began happening. Their shallow, grief-laden breathing became full and robust once more as Jesus resumed teaching them about the kingdom of God.

And, yet, just as the disciples thought they were on solid ground, Jesus did as he said he would... he left, for good, returned to the One from whom he

came. It must have been heart-wrenching for those he left behind. I imagine that they felt as if the wind was simply knocked out of them. Maybe they sighed loudly once again with stress and fear.

The disciples next did what all good church people do in times of fear and chaos... they planned a congregational meeting. They got busy getting their game plan together. There was so much to do and they needed to get better organized. It was time to elect new leaders to encourage them in the work Jesus had left in their trembling hands.

After all, they were now supposed to tell people about what God had done in Jesus, it was them who were the healers and reconcilers now... and that was a daunting mission. They came to understand that they were now the ones to continue his ministry to the outcast, the poor, the powerful, the sick... all without his physical presence. It was enough to take their breath away.

But out of the blue and before they even knew what was happening, they heard a mighty wind heading their way. It was a wind which blew through the entire house, filling each of them with a breath that came from somewhere else... Someone Else. The breath filled them with a power they did not understand. They had not asked for it, or expected it... it just showed up.

This power, this breath, this courage swooped into the room and filled them in a way they never could have predicted. They discovered a reserve of strength they did not know they possessed and a love they did not know they were capable of. They came face to face, lung to lung, with the gift of God's Holy Spirit, in Greek... Ruach... God's holy breath.

What did they do next? Once they realized they could breathe again, once they shook themselves loose from the stress and the anxiety, once they unwound the grip of fear, they found themselves speaking of God's deeds in their lives.

They burst out in languages they did not even know they could speak... telling the story of how they once were no people, but now they were God's people. How once had no name, no faith, no future, but now... they were God's own sons and daughters, given the breath of faith, a glimpse into a future in which they were to be received back to God's own self.

These timid, over-scheduled, stressed-out disciples found themselves testifying to who God was and what God had done in their lives. And the people listened. And the crowd grew. Of course, some thought they were

drunk... and if we were there, you and I might have assumed the same thing. Those waiting outside had no other way to explain it!

And then one among them gave voice to what was happening. And as that one preached, I imagine all of these people... from near and far, strangers and foreigners, young and old, began to breathe deeper.

They started to purposefully inhale some of this Spirit-breath into their own lungs, taking it into their own bodies. And the church was birthed into being... 3,000 on that day, with much more to come. And people far and wide, in all kinds of languages with all kinds of traditions, began to speak of God's love and grace at work in their lives and in the world.

And the breath of God blew freely and wildly, filling their lungs, giving them courage and a strength they did not know they had. And Christ's body, the church, was knit together and began to move.

They moved into the streets, where violence and pain led to brokenness and they spoke a word of hope and reconciliation,

They moved into the hospitals and clinics, and cared for those who were in pain and wrapped in grief,

They moved into the public square, where the hungry and destitute would gather, and they shared bread and changed the way we would care for each other.

But here is the kicker: While it is a lovely story, a meaningful story, a powerful story and one I love to tell... it is not a story that is contained only in the past.

God's Spirit still works this way. The Holy Spirit, the breath of God, is at work, here and now... in you. Through Scripture and prayers, through music and proclamation, through experience and relationships, in the waters of baptism and the sharing of communion, through service and giving and sacrifice, God's holy breath challenges us, comforts us, scares us, clarifies things for us.

If we are open to breathing it in, if we dare to pray "Come Holy Spirit," we will find our own lungs filled with courage, a reserve of strength, a passion of faith we did not even know we had. We see things we could never imagine seeing, or speak things we did not think we had the courage to say, or live entirely new lives based in service and love of neighbor.

I have witnessed the power of God's holy breath at work.

A couple of years ago I visited York Correctional Institution in Niantic, CT with a group of classmates from Hartford Seminary. We were there to encourage the women, to worship and pray with them. After passing security, we were led to a small chapel, and we took our seats as the women were escorted in.

Then, a group of women got up and stood by the piano on risers. Looking at this choir, they struck me as the type of people who get the wind knocked out of them by all kinds of hardship and all kinds of systems: abuse, poverty, addiction, hunger, sex trafficking, to just name a few. These women of all ages and ethnicities took a deep collective breath, and began to sing. As they began, a few looked nervous, a bit timid.

Sing: "I'm gonna lay down my burdens, down by the riverside"

As they breathed and sang, their timidity faded. Smiles grew on their anxiety-etched faces.

Sing: "down by the riverside, down by the riverside."

As they breathed and as they sang, they seemed to grow taller. Their heads lifted higher. They swayed with the power of their music.

Sing: "I'm gonna lay down my burdens, down by the riverside, ain't gonna study war no more."

As I sat there watching their transformation, I found myself swaying and purposefully trying to breathe in a bit deeper than I normally would. I had a clear sense I was watching God's holy breath rushing freely, sparking flames of new life and deep courage. I wanted to inhale as much as possible. For just a few moments, it was Pentecost. There we were in one room, singing songs, breathing in the breath of God and talking with each other about faith, about the way the world could be, should be, about the day when they would walk out of that prison into the light and all manners of things would be well. You just could not help but breathe it in with abandon.

That's just one story. I'm sure that you have others. God's Spirit is still at work around, among, and within us. We are given a breath of courage that causes us to sing and to dance, to live and get through another precious day. It is a breath we do not want to miss. Remember to breathe deeply, and remind your loved ones to do the same. And, then, watch and feel what happens next. Amen.