

Breathe Deeply
Psalm 104
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First Central Congregational UCC
19 May 2013

This week I came across this description of the early history of Earth:

The volcanoes filled the air with water vapor and carbon dioxide. The surface cooled, a crust formed, and oceans condensed upon it. In hot springs and undersea vents, simple carbon compounds bubbled up to form amino acids and peptides. The first bacteria moved through the ooze; then came blue-green algae, spreading across the planet like a watery carpet, drinking in sunlight and exhaling oxygen, giving breath to everything that came after. Geologists call this the Great Oxygenation Event—the most momentous change in the planet’s history.

I was particularly struck by the phrase, “giving breath to everything that came after.” We live and breathe because prehistoric algae set the stage for our evolution.

The ancient psalmist did not possess our scientific understanding, but he also knew that breath was essential to life and creation.

When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die and return to dust.
When you send forth your breath, they are created;
And you renew the face of the ground.

Giving breath so that everything might live is the great creative moment in our planet’s history. Today I want to celebrate that breath which is the very Spirit of God.

Let us pray.

Blow into our lives, O God, your Living Breath,
your Life-Giving Spirit.
Help us to notice your presence in every moment, every day.
Make plain before our very eyes
Our kinship with all creation.
And fill us with your power,
Transforming us to be your ministers to everything in need.
This we pray.
Amen.

Today is Pentecost. This is our annual celebration of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles in Jerusalem, celebrated as the birthday of the Christian church. In Acts 2 we read that the early followers of Jesus were gathered in one place together “and suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. . . . All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.”

On Pentecost we often focus upon fire; it’s why I’m wearing the fancy red chasuble. Cathedral of Hope in Dallas every year surprises their congregation with some new pyrotechnic effect. One year flames shot across wires suspended over the heads of the congregation. Since our sanctuary is mostly wood and not stone, I don’t think we should try any pyrotechnics. Plus, I can imagine Sam’s response if I were to even suggest the idea.

This year, though, I’m definitely not focused upon the fire, but upon the wind. The story we are told is that that day in Jerusalem the breath of God blew upon the gathered, filling them with new power. For, you see, in Hebrew breath and spirit are the same word – *ruach*. The breath of God that renews creation in Psalm 104 is the same wind, the Holy Spirit, which blows with power in Acts 2 creating the church. It was the same Spirit-Breath that hovered over the primordial waters of creation in Genesis 1. Our closing hymn calls it “Wind who makes all winds that blow.”

What sustains this entire universe in all its wild, wonderful glory, is God’s breath, God’s spirit which blows within nature, becoming the very breath and spirit of the creation itself. God breathes and Earth is renewed. God breathes and we are healed. God breathes and nature bursts forth into song.

Take a moment, and join with me in breathing God’s holy breath. Breathe deeply, filling your bosom with the spirit of God. Breathe out. Letting all that stress and busy-ness go. Breathe in God’s healing love. Breathe out. Letting your own care and nurture spread to everyone and everything around you. Breathe in, filling yourself with power and energy. Breathe out, sharing yourself with the rest of creation. Breathe the spirit of the living God.

We know that breathing is an essential aspect of our spiritual practice. If you have ever taken a yoga class or tried Buddhist meditation, you know that the first thing you must do is focus upon your breath. It can be difficult to breathe deeply. Our breaths are usually shallow. The first time I learned meditation, the instructor of the class required us to take slow inhalations and exhalations while she counted all the way to the number 12. Twelve counts on the inhale and twelve on the exhale, and it was tough for me. My body was not used to that kind of breathing. But all the spiritual practices of every major world religion teach us to concentrate upon breathing slowly and deeply. And even if you don’t discover the spiritual benefit of this practice, it is a great stress reliever.

A couple of weeks ago I took some time of personal retreat to work on the church’s annual goals and objectives. I spent a couple of days at Platte River State Park, in one of the cabins overlooking Owen Lake, the area where we just recently had the all-church retreat. I was only there a week later, but it was significantly more spring-like.

I didn’t work on plans the entire time I was there. I took moments to nurture myself and to experience the beauty of God’s creation. I would sit out on the screened-in porch to read or eat or simply to listen to the birds. And each day I took a couple of hours to go hiking.

I'd walk along creeks and the river, over hills and under trees, enjoying the beautiful weather – for it was fortunately in the 80's those two days. It snowed the day I came home. While hiking I saw geese and ducks, squirrels, wild turkeys, and deer, and even one rather large snake which startled me when he hurriedly slithered out of my path.

These moments are more than restful and relaxing, they have spiritual value in taking time to delight in God's handiwork. Even non-religious people know the value of moments like these. Adam Frank, who is a physicist and an atheist who blogs for NPR, wrote recently about the value of "noticing," which he took to be a scientific activity, but which I think is also a spiritual practice.

Adam Frank's column began with the observation that we are all too busy. In fact we are so busy that not only do we not stop to smell the roses, we probably haven't even paused long enough to notice that the roses are there. He continued:

Noticing . . . begins, with [the] simple act of seeing the smallest detail as an opening to a wider world of wonder and awe. . . the best place to begin is with a walk in the woods.

Frank writes that a walk in the woods can get us out of our own heads and clear our minds, especially if we take the time to notice patterns, shapes, colors, and the activity of nature. He even encourages us to hoist ourselves up into trees and take notes of what we see. I for one can't quite clamber up a tree as easily as I once did. And I'm probably a little afraid of what all would break on the way back down. But I understand his point. Maybe a nice bench along the trail would work?

He concluded this particular post:

Refining our capacity to notice is an act of reverence that we can bring to everywhere and everywhen. It's an invitation, bringing the world's most basic presence into view, opening our horizons and restoring our spirits.

Couldn't we all use a little dose of restoration?

And that is what God desires for us. God breathes, sending God's spirit through the creation, so that we might be healed and renewed. Recreated, in all the wonderful senses of that word.

One of the delights of Psalm 104 is the image of God it gives us. Robert Alter writes that "the poet imagines the presence of divinity in the world as a dynamic series of actions." What a fantastic idea – God as a dynamic series of actions. The Psalmist wants us to take the time to notice what's going on in nature, and when we do, he thinks we will discover God at play – sporting with sea monsters, crafting the heavens, riding on the wind. In one image, God is playing with the foundations of the earth like a child plays with building blocks. In another God is setting the table and providing for animals like a child inviting the family pets to a tea party.

Walter Brueggemann writes that this psalm proclaims that "God is known to be confident, serene, and at ease" and that everything we experience is a daily gift from God. Because of that we and all creation are moved to respond with "spontaneous wonder,

gratitude, and praise.”

All the creatures of Earth are our siblings who join with us in praising and worshipping God. If we take that walk in the woods and notice, as Adam Frank suggests, one thing we should listen for is the voice of our fellow creatures praising God. We are the family of God, joined in one circle of life. We are made of the same stuff and filled with the same life-giving spirit. We breathe the same breath -- God’s breath. Life-giving, life-renewing, playful and empowering breath.

And the breathing began when God’s spirit hovered over the waters, with “blue-green algae, spreading across the planet like a watery carpet, drinking in sunlight and exhaling oxygen, giving breath to everything that came after.” And God’s spirit continues to blow upon you and me, empowering and transforming us, that we might be the people God desires us to be.

So, take a walk today and notice the glory of God. Take a moment to delight in the beauty and joy of God’s handiwork. And, then, breathe deeply, breathing in the spirit of God, connecting back to the very moment of creation. Breathe deeply, breathing in the spirit of God, alive and powerful, renewing everything around you.

May my meditation be pleasing unto God, for I rejoice in the Lord.