

**“Breath”**  
The Day of Pentecost  
19 May 2024  
Trinity+St. Peter’s Episcopal Church  
San Francisco, California

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Ezekiel 37:1-14  
Psalm 104:25-35, 37  
Acts 2:121  
Romans 8:22-27  
John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

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Today I’d like for you to consider a Pentecost Problem. I’d like for us, all of us, to consider an answer to the question, “Where is the breath in my life, in my church, in my neighbor?” In order to understand what I mean by the word “breath,” I’d like to read a reading that is suggested for this day, but that isn’t much used. The reading is from Saint Paul’s letter to the Romans (8: 22-27). This will form the focus for our consideration on this day of Pentecost.

*We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.*

*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.*

### **The Breath of Creation**

We first meet the Spirit and her breath in the first creation story in Genesis 1, where the Spirit moves over the face of the deep. The Hebrew word used for Spirit in this reading is the word *ruah*, that is breath. Later that breath will be seen in God’s words spoken in the acts of creation, “Let there be...”. Our first encounter with the breath happens at our birth, when coming out of our mother’s womb we are induced to take in a deep first breath – a probably painful breath, a clue as to what is to come.

One day, on a flight to Israel, up above the Swiss Alps, I looked out of the window to see them bathed in the splendor of the rising sun, pink and peach, even approaching red. I stared for a few moments and then began to be aware of my breathing, the slow intake of air as I viewed this never before seen (at least for me) vision of creation. I was alive, the original breath still leading me to take in more air, beauty, sight, and the vast expanse of the earth - the gift of God’s breath.

We know it in the phrase when we describe something that has taken our breath away. In that phrase we know the gift of breath, and the gift of creation that come from the Spirit's breath. It used to be in the ceremonies of baptism that the priest would breathe on the waters in the font, replicating the gift of the Spirit in baptism. Or, at the exorcism, the priest would blow on the child, saying: "Out unclean spirit, give place to the Holy Spirit." The breath that accompanies us each day of our life, is a gift of that Spirit, blown into us, as it was blown into Adam and Eve. The subtext of creation and breath comes to the front again in this reading from Paul. Looking back on creation we suddenly realize that it is not a task accomplished but rather an on-going process, "*the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now.*" I hope we see the pun in Paul's text. The *first fruits* of the Hebrew Pentecost are no longer the grain of the field, (the original Pentecost was a harvest festival) but it is us – we are the first fruits yearning for adoption and redemption. Paul sees us hoping for that which is yet to be revealed to us. Now, what to do with that breath, a second question.

### **What is dried up in our lives, in our parish, that could use the breath of God? What might that breath be?**

There is a part of the reading from Romans that has always fascinated me. "*That very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.*" Paul sees the solution for the dryness of our praying – the Spirit supplies the words. That is the value that comes to us with periods of silence, as we wait for the words with which the Spirit will supply us. Words – what words do we use when we pray? Here the concern with language is what shall be our language of prayer if not the words and language that the Spirit gives to us. The stuff of life is beyond words and beyond knowing at times. Here the Paraclete stands beside us to comfort and to speak so that God might know our true intent. So let us be in the mind of the Spirit. Perhaps that is the real purpose of glossolalia, the gift of tongues. We pray with words we do not know, with groans that come from her heart.

What is the breath that we see and hear and listen to in our liturgy, in the words or our business as the people of God, in our words of witness to the people who live around us, the people that stick their head in the door to see what's going on here? In this we need to examine our witness, what we bear witness to in our community.

### **How might we use our corporate breath to testify to the Risen One?**

I was driving down Gough Street the other evening after dinner. As I saw the lights lighting up the exterior of Trinity+St. Peter's, I commented to Arthur to take a look at the beauty. The lights are a message to our community. Here we are, notice us, listen to our message, see what we do, experience the beauty of resurrection.

But then, how do we speak out against the greed of our time, the disregard of the oppression of others, the words that attempt to justify our injustice? I am, as I suspect you are, struck dumb by such requests. What can I do, what can I say? Here is where the Spirit supplies the words, standing by us as the Paraclete, as we call our nation and community to deeds of justice and sharing. That should be the breath of our parish. We have acts that are done here that speak to the message of resurrection, feeding the community, supplying clothing to the community, cleaning up the community, providing the beauty of music to the community. Is this enough? Certainly

not, and our conversation with one another about the ministry of this place ought to be dreaming of ways and words, born of the Spirit, that might lead us into further contact with those who live around us. The words of today's psalm supply an adequate end to this meditation.

*You send forth your Spirit, and they are created; \*  
and so you renew the face of the earth.  
32 May the glory of the Lord endure for ever; \*  
may the Lord rejoice in all his works.*

The Lord is risen. Alleluia  
The Lord is risen, indeed. Alleluia.

SDG