

May 23, 2021
The Day of Pentecost, Year B
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Ezekiel 37:1-14
Psalm 104:25-35, 37
Acts 2:1-21
John 17:6-19

I have been present at a handful of deaths. None was sudden; all by then were anticipated. None were welcome, though some were less unwelcome than others. In my experience of being present for another person's death, as the end approaches, your universe of sensory possibility narrows to one particular focus of attention: the dying person's breath. It's a bit like the Big Bang in reverse: the cosmos collapses, returning all to another sort of singularity. As you wait, you begin to notice when they breathe in and when they breathe out; gradually the time between breaths lengthens; eventually realize that you are breathing in and out in tandem with them ... breathe in, breathe out ... wait for it ... breathe in, breathe out ... count the seconds ... breathe in, breathe out ... wait, wait, wait, wait ... eternity is now *this* brief pause, this transition between *breath* and *death* ... waaaaaaaaait ... now they are really and truly gone, and *you* can wait no longer: you must take your first breath without them, your first breath in a world without them, your first breath in a world that is changed.

At the beginning of the life just ended was a first gasp of breath. I've not been present for a birth, but the movies and my imagination picture another waiting, another eternity-in-a-pause, this time in the still-pregnant transition between *birth* and *breath*. The baby is out, and I sense among those present another collective breath held ... waiting, waiting, waiting ... until for the first time the baby sucks in air and their lungs fill, and everyone takes a breath of deep relief, and the world is changed. Jakki and I still have friends from the church that we identify as our home congregation back in Burlington, Vermont. One is a nurse-midwife. Having been a midwife for over thirty years, she has delivered hundreds of human beings into the world. Fairly regularly she posts to Facebook a photograph of the sunrise, taken after coming off a night of "catching babies." These posts are always full of elation. I have not run this by her, but I imagine that, each time she takes a deep breath in concert with a newborn baby's first breath, she is re-filled, re-juvenated, re-vivified.

All this got me thinking about the beginning and end of my mother's life. Her *first* breath was in the company of *her* mother. Her *last* breath was in the company of her three daughters. Between first and last was a lifetime of breaths. Our Christianity gives us some ways of thinking about this. We might understand that each breath is from God, and that God gifts each of us with a lifetime of breaths. We might even say that, from first breath to last breath, God is breathing for us, in us, through us, filling our lungs with Spirit and thereby our bodies with life.

Spirit is the English translation of the Hebrew word *ruach* and the Greek word *pneuma*. If you know only one Hebrew word and one Greek word, these would be excellent choices. I'll just mention here in passing that *ruach* is a gender *feminine* noun and *pneuma* is a *gender* neuter noun. That's a good thing to remember if you ever wonder whether God must always be understood as male or as any gender at all.

That which we might call *ruach* wends her way through our scripture readings today. Actually, that which we might also call *pneuma* wends their way through our entire service. Today is, of course, the Day of Pentecost. The word *pentecost* means literally “fiftieth day.” To get to that fifty, the Jews of Jesus’ day counted from Passover, but we count from Easter. The timing of the first Pentecost comes from the Book of Acts. That’s also where we get Pentecost’s association with the gift of the Holy Spirit and the spread of the church into the world. While the Gospels tell the story of Jesus, the Book of Acts is characterized as the story of the Church or the story of the Holy Spirit. I suppose it’s really both. The story of Spirit the and the story of the Church are intricately and inseparably interrelated.

Of course, when the experts say the Book of Acts is the story of the Church, we might counter that the story of the Church was then and always will be the story of the Church’s people. In that case, the story of the Spirit and the story of the people are intricately and inseparably interrelated. The Book of Acts makes that so very clear. On that first Pentecost, a rush of wind may have filled the house where the disciples were sitting, but it was the disciples who were filled with the Holy Spirit. And so it is today. I miss our worship together in person because of what I’ll call the energy of presence that we share. We might not be Pentecostals, but we can still give credit for that to the Holy Spirit. Today I will most especially miss singing “Come down, O Love divine” with the congregation and our full choir. For some reason, that hymn always gets to me. We’ll sing it shortly. Even under our compromised circumstances, it will almost certainly still get to me, because, no matter how we’ve gathered, we are together in the Holy Spirit, who gives us with the breath we need to sing.

I’m not sure there has ever been a year when *breath* and *breathing* have been more on our collective consciousness. I probably don’t need to, but I’ll offer evidence of that in two images: first, that of a COVID-19 patient on a ventilator; and second, that of Derek Chauvin kneeling on George Floyd’s neck. We reached the first anniversary of the coronavirus pandemic a couple of months ago; the first anniversary of George Floyd’s death is Tuesday. In a way, metaphorically, it feels as if we’ve all been paused for a long time, in some unfamiliar and unpredictable transition, holding our breaths, waiting for *something*.

I do believe that our world is at a colossal moment of transition. If that’s true, then maybe the most fundamental question we face right now is this: are we at a beginning, or are we at an end? At times it has certainly felt like we are witnessing the end, as we sit at home holding our breaths, stuck in the transition from *breath* to *death*. But, the truth is, that is never where God leaves us. Christianity teaches us about paradox, about the transformative power of *yes*, *and*. Therefore it must be that we are *also* at a transition from *birth* to *breath*. We impatient humans might feel compelled to count the seconds, but the Spirit will breathe life into that newborn baby.

Remember, the Day of Pentecost is also the last day of the season of Easter, the season of resurrection, the season of death yielding new life. For Christians, the transition between *breath* and *death* is also the transition between *birth* and *breath*. After all, death itself is the entry to new life. We might not always see that new life, we might not always recognize it when we do see it, but we Christians keep breathing in that promise, through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is not to glorify suffering, but to embrace restoration.

Today, this Pentecost, we celebrate the Church and the Holy Spirit. Pentecost this year doesn't look like it does when we are at our gloriously in-person church-filling best. But that's okay, and maybe even better than okay. On this quieter and more reflective Pentecost, maybe we listen differently, and maybe we hear things that we missed before. And so today, and during the days ahead, notice your breath. Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out. And remember: with every breath you take, from birth to death, God is breathing *for you*, filling your lungs with Spirit and your body with life. Breathe in, breathe out, and *be*, re-filled, re-juvenated, re-vivified.