

Sermon for the First Sunday After The Epiphany

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Oh wow, it is good to see y'all. And thank you, again, for your patience with all this. I don't have my breath all the way back just yet, but I'll do the best with what I've got. And with one of those breaths, I really need to thank you. Deb, for your willingness and guts to step in and lead services, especially one of the most momentous services of the year on Christmas Eve. You'll make a fine Southern preacher yet. Thanks to Susan, also, for being willing to serve in spite of life's changes and chances. To Ed for continuing to show folks where to go and make sure they have what they need. To Dianne for keeping the heavens aware of our song. To Luke for piping services into the screens of us at home. To Nan and Barb for keeping the church in ship shape. To Emily and the Altar Guild and Jana and the Flower Guild for keeping this place so dang beautiful and ready for the moment Christ comes. There is someone, I'm sure, I've left out. I apologize. The brain fog that comes with Covid is all too real. With the breath I have, I give thanks for what I can remember and for what I cannot.

As you might imagine, I've been thinking about breath a lot over the past 18 or so days. I've got asthma, so breath is never terribly far from my mind, but especially during my quarantine, not only was I thinking about breath, I was measuring it. I've got one of those little pulse oximeters, the lobster claw pincher that goes over your fingertip, blinking red light and gentle squeeze. It shows a percentage of oxygen moving around in your body, giving a readout of just how effective your breath is at any moment. That thing that sustains us the most - breath - we rely on it to be there and pretty much forget about it until suddenly it isn't working right, interrupted by coughing fits or sneezes, shorter than usual or feeling just fine but clandestinely ineffective until you're suddenly light-headed and have no idea how you got to that point. Yeah, breath has been on my mind a lot. Shoot, the other day, I swept an inch of light snow off of two steps at the back of the rectory, and I had to take a sit down to retrieve that lost breath. It's gonna take a while to get back where I was.

Breath is a thing that shows up in our readings quite a lot. Not today, not directly, but it's still there, the unconscious rhythm supporting these words. I guess I could really shoehorn the idea in here and say Jesus had to hold his breath when he got baptized or that the Holy Spirit gets breathed into people at baptism and confirmation or that every word of God is a breath blown over the people. But I'm not gonna do that. I'll just own this today, I'm preaching about "Big 'S' Scripture" today, not so much these particular readings we just heard.

In our Prayer Book, we say that "Big 'S' Scripture" is the inspired word of God. Sounds great, right? But to really understand what it means, there's a cool bit of etymology we need to cover. The word "inspire" means to breathe in. To "expire" is to breathe out, sometimes for the final time. But the root there gives us the word "spirate," just to breathe. The Word of God is spirated, breathed in by God and out onto God's people. God's people inspire that Word, it becomes a part of them, and they expire it onto the page, and it becomes part of our entire body, and then we read it, inspiring again in this act of Holy Spirit-infused exchange over the milenia. And we do it on repeat, we re-spire, respirate. Not only does the Word of God remain alive because of this ongoing exchange, but it enlivens us. It becomes a part of us. It sustains us. And we expire it, too, joining in the exchange and sustaining those we meet in the process. Scripture is inspired by God, and it courses through us. Isn't that beautiful? I love that.

But I wonder, as I'm still sitting in the house measuring my oxygen levels and catching my breath after simple tasks, I'm wondering about how our breath can fail and how so much else is weakened when the lungs aren't there to keep these capillaries full. I wonder what it means when our breath is anemic, or when it carries all the oxygen we need but our lungs just can't make the exchange like they should. I know the literal answers, at least some of them. I've been living with them for my entire life to an extent and in a more pronounced way the last three weeks. I've read enough articles about prone breathing and weird hospital beds that turn patients

like rotisserie chicken. But in the spiritual sense? What of the inspiration that is breathed for us sitting at our fingertips?

When I get my breath back, I'll be leaning back into Bible Study Class, hopefully soon. If you have any doubts about the class and you're free on a Thursday morning, just come. It's fun, I promise. But also, it's immensely life-giving. And it's amazing to breathe that life back out for others to enjoy. It's also sustaining, even now as I have all the reasons in the world to doubt, it sustains me. And being reminded of some of the beautiful passages is a welcome exchange. My favorites for yours and on and on, life shared, people inspired, Holy Spirit-infused.

There is a caveat I've gotta put in here, and I try to do this any time scripture comes up, and that's the danger in breathing it out on folks. Given our current situation, I'm sure you can see where I'm headed with this. Sometimes our best intentions to share what sustains us harm others, and sometimes, just sometimes, we breathe that Word of God with the intent to harm. Folks, wear your spiritual masks, for God's sake, and keep those sacred scriptures where they belong: in the realm of sustenance, not in the spread of malformed spiritual disease.

I'm gonna leave it there today, folks. I love you all, and I am so grateful for the many ways you have inspired me over the past few weeks, and I pray that I can inspire you, as well. This sacred exchange that undergirds our scripture, Holy Spirit-infused and pulsing with every breath, may it fill our lungs, our hearts, our brains, all the way down to our cold, winter toes with nothing less than the breath of God.