

February 26, 2023
Genesis 2:4-9
Matthew 4:1-11

The First Breath

Breathing comes naturally to us. And naturally we don't pay much attention to it. We breathe in and out, inhaling and exhaling. Air enters our body and leaves again, and we hardly notice. It's an automatic function of our respiratory system. We don't have to think about it. Except maybe when we are climbing a steep hill or chasing a runaway grocery bag or if we have breathing problems. Then we know how important breathing is. And how every breath keeps us alive.

Breath is life. And in order to live we must be breathing all the time. It begins at our birth. When we are born, we gasp spontaneously. As a baby as it moves from inside its mom to outside its mom, the baby's breathing system switches on. The lungs activate and they fill with air for the first time. Their eyes pop open and they inhale suddenly. I have heard doctors describe this moment as amazing and magical. Seeing a baby take its first breath.

Every breath after that keeps us alive. We breathe in the air, and it animates us and activates us. It fills us with oxygen and something more.

Potential, energy and space, peace and hope. Our breathe connects us to something outside of ourselves. A deep breath steadies us; it centers us. We often need to take a deep breath. Before a plunge. Before a big speech. Before a moment of truth. We breathe in expansively through our nose, filling our lungs all the way down to the bottom. Then we let it all out again, and we let go of all that we are holding in. We remember to breathe and we reconnect with life, with God. With one another. With ourselves. Go ahead and take a deep breath now and then notice how you feel.

In the book of Genesis, in the beginning, before God created anything, there was no life. And no breathing. There was nothing to breathe in and out; no animals, no plants, no birds, no fish, no algae or protozoa, who breathe in their own special way. There was nothing but dust. So God took some of the dust and made a person out of it. From dust we are made and to dust we shall return. That's what we remembered on Ash Wednesday a few days ago. The dirt that we walk around on and track into the kitchen is what we are made from. And that's humbling, to

know that we are nothing more. We are here, but some day we won't be. It's true for all of us. We are of the earth and to the earth we will return. But we aren't just dirt. We aren't a lump of clay, rolled out and pressed into shape by God. No, God took this dirt and made it into God's own image and then breathed life into it. God's own breath became our breath. God's life became our life. We were activated by God's Spirit. And at the moment of our birth, our lungs filled with air and our eyes popped open and it was like magic. We were alive, and breathing with the divine breath.

Think about that first breath. In your next breath, think about the breath of God entering your lungs and filling your body. Think of it transforming you from a dusty lump into something alive. Something aware and alert to the world around you. Your breath is the breath of God. Your life is the life God has placed in you purposefully. And every breath you take in repeats that first breath, that miracle in the beginning. Go ahead. Breathe. And notice it all. Notice the air moving in and out. Notice your lungs taking oxygen in and letting carbon dioxide out.

Notice the wonder of your heart beating, and your body pulsing with life. You are alive. And every breath you breathe in comes from God. The simple act of acknowledging of your breathing makes you more aware. You are aware of you body. You are aware of your movement. You are aware of living. And you are aware that you depend on something besides yourself for that. Your breath comes from outside of you. It does not come from you. It is, in fact, a gift. And what a wonder to be born again into that knowledge. It's like an awakening. Just like baptism. Coming up out of the deep, dark airless space into the world again, where we can take a breath and know what a gift it is. I imagine Jesus doing the same at his baptism, coming up out of the water, taking a breath. Emerging from the water into the daylight, and that first gasp, filling his lungs. He hears a voice: "You are more than dust. You are my son, my beloved. With you I am well pleased. Breathe in. Breathe out. My life now lives in you." We are at the beginning again. It is creation once more and we are in the garden of Eden. God breathing life. Jesus breathing in. Things are as they should be. There is connection and communion and awareness. Jesus remembers what we forgot. We forgot

where our breath came from. We lost our focus, our center. We lost Eden. We lost God.

In baptism, we remember. We remember where our breath comes from. We remember where life comes from. We know we have overlooked it. We know we have ignored it. We have been taking shallow breaths and living shallow lives. Always living on the surface. Moving fast without thinking. Longing something to hold us down, to go deep. To give us hope. To fill us with life. But we settle for so much less.

That's what we are always tempted to do. To ignore what is simple and deep. For what is quick and shallow. That's what Jesus is tempted to do in the wilderness. He is tempted to forget where his life comes from and think only of where it might be going. He is tempted to turn rocks into bread. If he is the Son of God, why not? He is hungry and he needs something to eat. He has the power, so why not use it for himself? But Jesus takes a deep breath. He remembers life is not just about a full belly. It's about having a full heart and a full spirit. Jesus breathes deeply and tells the tempter, no. He helps us remember to stop and take a breath whenever we feel empty, whenever we want to fill ourselves

with whatever. To breathe for a moment and remember what it means to be alive. That we aren't just bodies with stomachs. And what gives us strength is not just the fried chicken at potlucks or the snacks after church. But the Spirit that we share. The Spirit that gives us hope and grace and life.

The tempter tries again. "So you are a child of God, Jesus, but are you sure? Are you really sure? Why not prove that God cares about you? Why not get God to step in for once. Let the angels catch you like it says they will." But Jesus takes another deep breath and says no. He doesn't need theatrics to prove his connection to God. He inhales and exhales, and he knows God is with him; In him and around him. His breath is proof enough. Our breath is proof enough for us. We don't need to give anyone evidence. We don't need a law to tell us. We don't need an expert to inform us. We don't need to come up with a perfect argument to destroy our enemies and prove that we are worthy because we ARE worthy. We don't need to demonstrate that God will save us. Because God already has. With every breath, God fills us announces that we are worthy of life.

The tempter tries one final time. “But wouldn’t it be better if you were in control of everything? Wouldn’t it be easier if you took charge? If you, the beloved Son of God, ruled over everyone and everything? Just grab hold of life and rule it.” But Jesus takes a deep breath and refuses. He says no to all the power in the world. He doesn’t need it. He doesn’t want it. This is not what life with God is about. Fullness does not come through violence or force or manipulation. It is not a result of controlling things or controlling one another. Life is freedom and movement. It is breathed into us. It inhabits us, inspires us, expands us. Then it travels outward and onward. It is given to us with no strings attached. So that WE might breathe. So that OTHERS might breathe. So we might all have life and have it abundantly.

We who are alive in Christ live freely. We breathe so that others can breathe too. We stand with the least and speak up for the last. And affirm the humanity of the lost because all of us have the breath of God in us. Because we are all dust and to dust we shall return. Because life does not come from being Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. Life comes from above. It comes to each of us as a gift with every

breath. And we take that breath as Jesus did with love. We take that breath and give thanks for it. We take that breath, trusting that the breath will always be there. Breathe in, breathe out. Creation happens again and again.

During this time of Lent, from now until Easter on April 9, we remember. We refocus. We reexamine our priorities and return to God. We begin by taking a deep breath and recentering ourselves. Breathing in again the life that God has given. We remember of our first breath that was breathed into us by God. We remember that it is source of our being. That all we need to be ourselves, to be alive, to be filled with God's grace and love is to breathe. So let us be aware of our breath. Let us imagine breathing in God's mercy. Breathing out God's grace. Every day during this season, take a moment to place your hand on your heart. Close your eyes. Feel the air coming into your body and leaving it gracefully. Breathe in. And feel God's life animating you. Feel the Spirit illuminating every cell. Let the breath go and let it leave. Don't hold it in. Let worry leave you. Let fear leave you. Let feelings of unworthiness and shame leave you. Pause and breathe in again. Breathe in and let the

strength and energy and divine joy of God expand within you. Breathe out and let the joy and strength come close to your heart. Rest in knowing that God is with you and in you. God is part of you and you are part of God. Breathe in the gift of life. Breathe out the gift of presence. Live in this hope. Live in this truth. Just breathe and trust in the love that gives you life with every breath.