

Daring to Inhale

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Acts 2:1-21
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC
on Pentecost Sunday, June 4, 2017*

"Take a breathe, daddy. Take a breathe."

God bless that sweet son of mine. Liam couldn't have been much older than three that day he saw his daddy getting a bit anxious and remembered excitedly his mama's exhortations that we should take deep breaths if we ever get worked up. When "breath" became "breathe" in that little toddler mind, a favorite family saying was born. "Take a breathe," we now say to each other.

On this Pentecost Sunday, my friends, may I exhort you to "take a breathe"? Take a moment to breathe in this air. Really, do so! Breathe in the breaths of your neighbor, your enemy, the woman who drives you crazy at work, the guy down the pew whose name you never can remember. Breathe in the breaths of all the saints who came before you, those who planted the seeds to trees in whose shade they will never rest. Breathe in the breaths of the self you once were, the person you are today, and the you you long to be. Breathe in the breaths of God's created world, aspiring and conspiring for its care. Take a breathe, church, and let it steady you, stir you, and send you forth, for you might just dare to inhale the Spirit of God.¹

For this Spirit, this breath of God, began at creation – sweeping over the face of the waters, separating light from darkness, breathing life into beings, and ordering the chaos. It hung in the darkness of Golgotha, as Jesus breathed his last. And from there it gathered energy, pouring forth into locked rooms of disciples after the crucifixion and onto imperfect-yet- hopeful Jesus-followers confused in the haze of resurrection. As we've talked about these last three weeks, the greatest gift of the Spirit was that of presence, the promise that even in Jesus's departure from this

¹ I give thanks to Barbara Brown Taylor for her sermon "The Gospel of the Holy Spirit" in *Home By Another Way* who encouraged me to think about all the breaths we take and how they connect us ever more firmly to one another.

earthly realm, we are never alone. But we would be remiss if we didn't acknowledge the other gifts of the Spirit as it unleashed upon this world that Pentecost day. Like the steadying breath of a parent of a toddler, the Spirit of God orients and grounds us in the presence of God. Like the stirring breath taken in the face of trial or challenge, injustice or loss, the Spirit of God dislodges us from our paralysis and strengthens us to do what we couldn't dare to imagine. Like the launching breath an athlete takes before diving in the pool, sprinting off the blocks, or batting that home run, the Spirit of God sends us forth accompanied with the unleashed energy of God.

They certainly didn't know what they were breathing Spirit-breath, those disciples on that Pentecost night. But just like we do when life just doesn't go as we had planned, or when dreams we held became disrupted in the chaos of change, those disciples were stuck. Cloistered together in a room for fear of the Christ who had departed and the spiritual pollutants of the world that had arrived, the disciples weren't ready for the force of nature that burst forth.

Blowing, rushing, clanging, resounding, burning, igniting — the Spirit of the Lord came upon them indiscriminately like a "holy hurricane."² And for those disciples, it seemed to steady them, orienting them to God's presence even in their fear. It seemed to stir them, rustling up new languages but common understanding. And it seemed to send them forth, launching a worldwide movement as they told far and wide the greatest news ever heard.

Last year on Pentecost, I shared about the Special Committee, telling you of a recent meeting we had had about these buildings where I'm certain all of us left with headaches, our minds swimming with data and numbers and challenges and dollar figures. And I shared with you then what one brilliant and faithful member of our committee said, speaking it with such certainty to will it into being: "God has called us to this place for such a time as this! And even in our fear, we must feel the bold and courageous language of the Spirit breathing new life among us!"

² Again, credit to Barbara Brown Taylor for this brilliant turn of phrase!

Call it a happy accident, or call it divine providence, but either way: that the Special Committee's presentation on the future of our church's facilities and mission will be shared today — Pentecost Sunday — feels to me like a moment our beloved community is being invited to "take a breathe." To dare to inhale what this wild and relentless Spirit will send rushing our way. To let it settle in our bones and fill us with hope. To let it steady us in what we've always known, stir within us a new hope, and send us forth to do the work of Love to which we have been called.

So we wonder today — what will we do when the Spirit of God gets moving among us? How will it reshape the living of our everyday lives? What will the Spirit call us to do? And as individuals and as a church, what if our response to the breathing of God's Spirit in and through us is equally as bold, equally as transformative, equally as courageous? What might it ask us to be and to do, and how might we recognize that steadying, stirring, sending forth Spirit breath at work?

About six weeks ago at the end of the workday, I had just picked up my kids from the Children's Center, and we were making our way back to the car when — wouldn't you know it — we ran into our old friend and former minister here at First Baptist, Kyle Caudle! With baby Silas in his carseat by my side and Kyla, Liam, and Annabelle running circles around the breezeway, Kyle and I began to catch up with one another. Of all things, Kyle was asking me about the work of our Special Committee on Facilities and Mission, when all of a sudden, he hollered out - and I kid you not about this - "a piece of the building just fell off!" Landing not a foot away from where baby Silas lay sleeping in his car seat, this here chunk of the chapel masonry had fallen off and to the ground below. And while we were discussing the church buildings, no less!

Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that "asking for an experience of the Holy Spirit is only half the equation, however. The other half is recognizing it when it comes."³ Sometimes we pick up on the subtleties of the Spirit, and other times we need the metaphorical equivalent of a piece of a building to fall off and nearly strike

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, p147.

the new life beside it to see the Spirit rustling in our midst. Sometimes we try to inhale the presence of God deeply — leaning into moments of vulnerability, finding space for fervent prayer, sacrificing something that means a great deal — but that breath gets stuck in our throat and we nearly choke. Sometimes the wind of God in our life is as loud as a tornado or as quiet as a whisper. But regardless of its form, you and I know that encounters with the Spirit of God are disruptive: upending our norms and recalibrating our certainties.

And so I ask you today: how can **you** recognize the Spirit at work within and around you? What might we as individuals or together as a church do to intentionally invite the Spirit to let loose in our lives and surround the proverbial walls of our church building?

In his book, *God's Politics*, Jim Wallis told a story of breathing, of allowing the Spirit to rush where it will go and welcoming whatever may arise. It happened during those horrible days of apartheid in South Africa, days when the government was hell-bent on silencing the opposition and cancelled a rally where Archbishop Desmond Tutu had planned to speak. Undeterred, Tutu decided to move the rally into St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town, and fill the church with worshipers instead. Well as their worship unfolded, hundreds of police surrounded the perimeter of that church building, with the intention on intimidating Tutu and the worshipers into submission. When Tutu stood up to preach, the police entered the Cathedral, firearms and notepads drawn, so they could record his words as they lined his walls.

But ever the prophet, Tutu would not be intimidated or silenced. He railed against the evils of apartheid. He preached the power of God's justice to set a people free. He prophesied, saw visions and dreamed dreams. And at one extraordinary moment, Tutu scans the faces of the police around those walls and addressed them directly in his distinct brogue: "You are powerful," Tutu said. "You are very powerful, but you are not gods, and I serve a God who cannot be mocked. So, **since you have already lost**, since you have already lost, I invite you today to come and join the winning side!" In an instant, the congregation erupted in dance and song, filled with the Spirit of hope. And those police? Well they didn't know *what*

to do.⁴ For when the Spirit of God rushes and the people of God dare to inhale, no manner of intimidation or threat can hold back that breath. And when the Spirit breathes, it has the power to change the world.

Steadying, stirring, sending forth... the Spirit of God is breathing and falling fresh on you and on us. Do we dare to inhale? Amen!

⁴ Jim Wallis, *God's Politics*. As told to me by dear friend and fellow pastor, Scott Dickison.