

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Joshua H. Narcisse
Sunday, June 29, 2025

Nearer Than Breath

Genesis 2:4-8

These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no vegetation of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground, but a stream would rise from the earth and water the whole face of the ground— then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed.

It occurs to me that like most things, we notice our breath only at the extremes. As I've said to anyone I've given a tour of Church Health to when we get to the YMCA portion, "I get really good at praying when I am fighting for my life on the stairmaster." And that is true, when I am trying my hardest to breathe, when I can't quite seem to catch and control my breathing, I notice my breath, quite easily.

We notice our breath most easily at the extremes. When we realize that we're holding our breath in the midst of receiving bad news. Or waiting to hear just what will come out of your little one's mouth as you hope against all hope that they don't say something crazy to that friend who asked them the most innocuous question.

We notice our breath most easily at the extremes, when we bear witness to the holy, sacred, and devastating moment when a Beloved takes their last breath and you see their body empty of breath for the final time.

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When yourself gasping, “I can’t breathe,” when you wished a Beloved could breathe again just one more time, when you see someone’s breath snatched from their body by human hands, when you can’t breathe deeply because the chemical emissions in the air you have breathed for so long have caused you to develop asthma and other respiratory issues, when breathing becomes a labor and not the unconscious act that makes our existence possible, then Beloved, of course, we finally notice our breathing.

And that makes sense, we often only notice God at the extremes also. As Pastor Mary reminded us last week when she told the story of Elijah, when God is in the fire and the wind and earthquake we are good at recognizing God. When we find peace when we know we should be anxious, joy when we know we are bereft, hope when we know how downright foolish it is, we recognize God. And that *is* God.

But there is so much more God outside of the extreme moments, that if we are sensitive only to the extremes we’ll eventually find ourselves practicing idol worship. Worshipping a God of our most intense needs and desires, a God that we’ve fashioned in our own image.

And I think God knew that. Perhaps that is why God in God’s infinite mercy crafted us from the dust and then in the first act of life, God initiates for humanity a demonstration on how to breathe. To breathe into us the breath of life, the breath of God, the spirit of the living God, into dust and clay and dirt.

I think there is a divine intentionality there, that the first thing God shows us how to do is not to till the ground or name the animals, not to make fire or tend to the vineyards, not even how

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to protect ourselves or how to show someone love and care. I think there is something intentional about God's first act toward humanity to be a lesson in how to breathe.

At least that's what was most salient and true for our ancestors in the faith who put pen to paper to try and capture the infinite indescribable mystery of a God who can also become so immediate as to kneel down in the dust and draw so close to us that God's breath becomes our breath.

Breathing is an intentional work. Not the kind of breathing we do, the kind of shallow half breathing we are so good at in each moment. But the kind of breathing that is indeed the breath of life, the breath of living, that reminds you that living and existing are two very different things.

The kind of breath that makes your body move, that displays just how wide your diaphragm can expand and just how loudly the air passing through your body can be, almost like a rushing mighty wind. The kind of breathing that reminds you breath is a gift from God. The kind of breath that reminds you that the very spirit of the living God is passing through you with each inhale and exhale.

Perhaps if we breathed like that, we would notice God all up and through our bodies, our minds, our lives, our loves, and our faith. And not just when something extreme happens and captures our attention.

That is what Pastors Courtney, Mary, and I have been trying to point toward during this sermon series, that nearer than wind, truth, silence and breath, is the inescapable reality of God. That nearer to us than the blood that courses through our veins, nearer than the gap between the

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thoughts we think and the words we speak, nearer than this Memphis humidity on our skin, is a God, whose spirit has been poured out on all flesh.

Between you and me, you don't have to tell anyone else, but are you taking that for granted?

Have you grown so used to the constancy of God's nearness that you've stopped depending on it? Have you stopped noticing that God is near?

I know that sometimes I have. Sometimes the pace of ministry does not leave room for the noticing of God. And I too imagine that the pace of your own lives leave little room to notice God's nearness, little room to depend on anything more than what you can touch and see and control. The Good News, and there is always Good News Beloved, is that as breathwork practitioners remind us, we can always return to our breath.

Humor me will you with a quick show of hands, how many of you are familiar with breathwork?

I figured there'd be a good handful of you cause Idlewild is just the kind of congregation that would know about breathwork.

But for those who are not as familiar, breathwork is a breathing practice that prioritizes intentionality around breathing. Breathwork guides you in practices that moves your breathing from your chest to your diaphragm, breathing into your belly and out so slowly and forcefully it's like letting the air out of a balloon. That kind of breathwork is proven to connect our body to our mind and can quite literally aid us in regulating our nervous system. Breathwork gives us a natural initial response to anxieties and depression, can lower our blood pressure and get more

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oxygen into our bloodstream, it works out our respiratory muscles and our cardiovascular system.

There are so many bodily benefits to proper breathwork. And breathwork practitioners remind us time and time again that when in our breathing we get distracted or frustrated or feel insecure about if we're doing something right. When we feel like nothing is working and it's all for naught and there is no difference being made, we can *always* come to our breathing.

And they may indeed be talking only about the air that passes through our bodies. But in the mind of this preacher they remind us of an eternal truth of the Good News, we can always come back to God. God who is so near to us that God put within us a way home, that we practice in every moment. A breath that identifies us as God's own.

Beloved, in my grief, I have had questions, frustrations, uncertainties. The kind that I can't easily distract myself from by keeping busy. I reckon I am not the only one who's been there before. And so I took those questions and frustrations and uncertainties, as I often do, to a trusted adult in my life. Because most days it still feels like I am cosplaying at adulthood at best.

I was at dinner with the Rev. Dr. Debra Reid, who I've come to refer to as my "Memphis Mom." I was there sitting in my laments. "Rev., how can I ever love again? How could I ever be happy again? Why would I ever trust God again."

And Rev. Reid, in the way that I am so grateful that she always does, took a breath. Looked at me and said, "Joshua, I don't know. But here is what I do believe. When we come out of the womb, and the doctor spans us on the bottom and we take that first breath in, we are breathing in God. And when we take that first breath we take on a bit of God's Spirit. And so

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while we're living we get to call God by different names: Kay, Joshua, Debra. And when we come to the point where we take that last breath, we are breathing that God back out and it returns to God where we came in the first place."

Beloved, take a deep breath with me.

And feel the God within you, and the person next to you. And then remember when you call the name of your person, your Beloved, your parent, your partner, your child, your friend, that there is in each of them a part of them that you may know only by their name, but that God knows only as Godself.

I wonder, if we remembered that, I wonder if we remembered that with each breath we take, how we would handle one another. How we would talk to one another. What kinds of stories we'd be willing to believe and not believe about one another. I wonder, if in each breath we took, we recognized the God in us and each other, how little tolerance we'd have for systemized hatred and institutionalized brutality and a culture that would prefer conformity rather than showing up authentically in our bodies no matter how we look, how we sound, who we love and how we identify, because all are a beautiful expression of the fullness of God.

I wonder Beloved, if we took the time to breathe, the kind of breath that reminds us that we are living, if we would not hasten the coming of the kingdom of God, right here where we are, because the Spirit of God would not be stifled or shallow or fleeting as our breath so often is, but rather God's Spirit would be alive and full and everywhere.

Because that is the hope, the promise, and the power of Pentecost. That we who are the Beloved of God, have been filled with the breath of God, the Spirit of God to come alive, to

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hasten the day when the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest, to build for the kingdom of God so that all flesh can be caught up in the love of the living God who is always nearer than wind, truth, silence, and even our very breath. To the glory of God, Amen.