

Ezekiel 37: 1-14; (Psalm 104: 24-35, 37b); Acts 2:1-21; John 15: 26-27; 16: 4b-15

Breath is so important. We've always known that, it's the most basic human need we have, the need for oxygen, which is life-giving. Without it, we would last mere seconds. We've seen that increasingly in the past year, both with the pandemic – one of the biggest issues of which is the inability to breathe well – and with the death of George Floyd, whose breath was cut off by the police officer kneeling on his back, and who was reported to have said as some of his final words “I can't breathe”, a rallying cry taken up by many to fight the injustices facing the black community. Breath is something some have to fight for, and that others take for granted. For many of us, we don't think about breathing, until we need to, for whatever reason. But it can be used to calm us when we're angry or stressed, it can be used to indicate our frustration or to release tension through sighs. Breath is fundamental to being human.

Breath is significant in our spiritual tradition too. In one of our creation stories, God made the first human out of the earth, and he only came to life when God breathed into him. We heard in our gospel reading a few weeks ago, in what seems like a precursor to Pentecost, when the risen Jesus appeared to the disciples the first time, he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” And breath plays a role in our first reading today, about the Valley of the Dry Bones, where God tells Ezekiel in a vision that if he prophesies to the dry bones, God will cause breath to enter them, and allow them to live again. We're told that the bones say “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.” I wonder for how many of us those words might resonate these days. “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.” This pandemic has taken the hope away from many, and as we sit in our lockdown, one that was recently extended until at least mid-June, it may feel like we're cut off completely. Maybe we, too, feel like our bones are dried up, at least in a metaphorical sense. It's not easy to feel that way, but we know that God is with us in that feeling. And part of God's response to that, “I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live,” also echoes through to us today. God's spirit is within each and every one of us, and this Pentecost Sunday is a reminder of just that.

I heard an interesting idea recently, one that's apparently been kicking around for a long time, but that's new to me. The idea is that for the 2 000 years before Christ lived and died as one of us, that time was the time of God the Father, where that was the primary focus of faith. That makes sense, as that time would have lined up with a lot of the stories from the First Testament. The next 2 000 years, from Christ's death until about the year 2 000 was the time of God as Christ. That was a time where the church and Christianity held a lot of power and sway, for better or for worse. Scholars now describe us in a time they call “post-Christendom”, or the time after the church held so much control, and where it doesn't have much of a say in many circumstances in the world around us. So maybe we're now in the third chunk of time, the time of God the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit has always been beautiful and wonderful and mysterious, something we don't always see or understand. The Holy Spirit can guide us, in our waking and sleeping, if only we're willing to be led.

The story of Pentecost, which we heard in our second reading today, is one of the most exciting and interesting to imagine stories we have in the Bible. If I were an artist, I think this would be the first biblical image I would try to create. The “divided tongues, as of fire” would be so vibrant, full of the colours of fire. That's why we wear red on Pentecost, after all, to commemorate that event. But, more than that, I love the imagery of the diversity present for this event. Pentecost affirms diversity. We may get bored hearing the list of names read aloud now, and it can be quite a challenge for whoever is reading it to pronounce some of them, but it emphasizes the vast array of people that were present, people “from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem”. Pentecost affirms diversity, and the value in having a diverse group of people, each of whom is a child of God, and to whom God speaks. It's not only the disciples who hear this message, or only the Israelites, but people from each nation under heaven. If we truly are in the time of the Holy Spirit now, this seems to mean that this is a time in which we also need to celebrate and encourage diversity around us.

After this happens, and in response to disbelievers, Peter quotes a passage from Joel, a prophet from the First Testament, that, among other things “your sons and your daughters shall prophesy”. Now, being prophetic isn't necessarily about predicting the future, and what's to come, but about speaking the hard truth. There were many

prophets throughout the First Testament, but one of the ones that sticks out in my mind is Jonah. He's often most famous for having been in the belly of a whale, or a big fish, depending on your translation, but he was doing that to avoid going to Nineveh, a place he didn't like, to prophesy. He was to tell people a hard message – that they needed to change their ways – or that, essentially, they wouldn't like what came next.

People don't like being told to change their ways, because they like the comfort of what they know. We see that in our lives on a regular basis. People want to keep doing things the way they've always been done. But we have prophetic voices speaking out these days too: voices from the Black community telling us about the injustices they're facing because of the systems we've created; voices from the Asian community speaking out about the increase in violence they've been experiencing since the pandemic began; Palestinian voices speaking out about the oppression they're facing from the Israeli military and government and how North America has been complicit in this oppression; voices from the Indigenous communities speaking out about the impact of colonization and residential schools, and the generational suffering that comes with that; voices from the LGBTQ2+ community, speaking out about the suffering and homophobia they experience; voices speaking out about climate change, and the dangers we've put our environment through, and the impact to our lives and our world if we don't change our ways; and many others. It may seem like these voices are endless, that they're in all aspects of our lives and media, and you may be tired of hearing them. But they're speaking up because the time has long passed, and they need to be heard. They are prophesying to us by speaking these hard truths, and they are voices we need to listen to. God's spirit has been and is being poured out upon us, continually, and we need to listen to the voices of those who have had the courage to feel the call of that spirit and speak the hard truths to us. We need to not do as some did on the day of Pentecost, sneering and saying, "They are filled with new wine." These are sons and daughters, children of God, prophesying to us. May we be open to hear their words, and maybe even open to see visions and dream dreams, as the reading continues.

Pentecost is a fiery, exciting, spirit-filled time in the church, but it's not meant to be a time that's soon forgotten. Yes, the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles and gave them the gift of speaking in tongues, which is something we may not see as often in our lives or in our tradition today. But that doesn't mean that the Holy Spirit isn't still active in and around us today. God's spirit lives in each and every one of us, and leads us in ways we might never expect. And, as we heard in our Gospel reading today, the Spirit "will guide you into all the truth". May our hearts and minds be open to hearing the truth, in whatever form we are graced with it, and may our hands and feet respond with action.

Amen.