

“The Breath of God”  
The Rev. Lauren McDonald  
Bruton Parish Church – Williamsburg, VA  
Trinity Sunday, June 7, 2020  
Genesis 1:1-2:4a, Matthew 28:16-20

Wow, it’s so good to see you. Well, *see* a few of you, and imagine all the rest of you tuned in to your screens. I’ve missed you. I can’t tell you how much it has meant to me to receive your emails and cards and flowers and meals and most especially your prayers that have lifted me up as I’ve been recovering from COVID-19. I have been so well supported, and I’m so grateful.

One of the symptoms of COVID-19 is shortness of breath which for some people leads to not being able to breathe at all. My shortness of breath has never been that extreme. It’s kind of like how you feel when you get to the top of a long flight of stairs and you can’t quite catch your breath. I have found myself putting my hand on my chest to remind me that I’m okay and I need to concentrate on taking deep breaths. When I do that, I can breathe just fine. I’ve been describing it as having to think about breathing, only normally I don’t have to think about it – I just do it.

Having shortness of breath has caused me to reflect on what it means to breathe. It’s a requirement for human life, and yet it’s something many of us take for granted because our bodies do it for us whether we think about it or not. Others of us don’t take it for granted at all – people with asthma or COPD or other health issues with their heart or lungs have often experienced the struggle of not being able to breathe. They’ve learned to appreciate every breath they take.

In our passage from Genesis this morning we hear how God created the heavens and the earth. A wind from God swept over the waters. Wind could also mean breath or Spirit. Sometimes when I feel the wind on my face, I think of it as God’s breath gently touching me. The Spirit of God blew over the formless void and breathed life into Creation. Then God spoke the Word and light came into the world. The Holy Trinity even at the beginning. Holy God, self-giving Word, immanent Spirit. God as love, not as a noun but as a verb. Love above us, with us, in us. God breathing everything into existence through God’s love. That’s some pretty powerful breath.

And we were created in the image of that Triune God. God saw everything that God breathed life into as good. Original goodness. Each and every human being with the breath of God in us.

Each and every one of us cherished by God who was not only in relationship with God's own self but who wanted to be in relationship with us.

Unfortunately, as the story goes on, it turns out that we didn't think God was enough for us. We kept turning away from God, distracted by our own wills and desires, seduced by wealth or power or other gods, idols that promised to protect us, to keep us safe, to hand our enemies over to us, and to ensure that we had whatever we wanted. Those idols have always failed us, and so we return, crying out for God to hear us, and God always does.

After a long history of making covenants with us, only to have them broken again and again, in an act of ultimate humility, our self-giving God, the 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the Trinity, took on the limits of human flesh, brown, Middle-Eastern human flesh, in the form of Jesus.

Living among us, teaching us, healing us, Jesus showed us what love with skin on looks like. Love as an action, not a feeling. Self-giving love that did not stop, even when we humans stopped his breath by putting him to death on a cross. Jesus died from asphyxiation. He could not breathe.

Of course, God's breath could not be stopped permanently. Jesus rose from the dead, living and breathing and loving, and he breathed his spirit into the disciples. Last week Bishop Susan invited us to imagine what that breath might have felt like, that warm breath of God's peace mixed with love that draws us out into the world rejoicing in the power of the Spirit. When we feel that breath, like the first disciples, we know how beloved we are, we know how God delights in us, and we can't wait to share the message, we can't stop shouting the good news. We want everyone, everyone to hear it. Just like on the day of Pentecost.

That's what Jesus is commissioning the disciples to do. To go into the world, baptizing in the name of the Holy Father, the self-giving Son, and the immanent Spirit ever present with us from the beginning of creation until the end of the age. Jesus sends them out to teach what he taught – and a quick review of the Sermon on the Mount will tell you what that was. He sends them to make more disciples, more people who know that they are beloved and who will follow in the way of love. Jesus promises to be with them. They do not go alone. They aren't alone. We aren't alone.

Listen to me. We are loved. And we aren't alone. We are good – that goodness breathed into us by the one who created us.

And so is every other person on this earth.

But we often act as if we don't know that we are loved and as if we don't believe that goodness has been breathed into the others who share this earth with us.

If we did believe and if we did follow Jesus' commands to love God and love one another, then we could not allow the systems of racism and injustice that oppress Black People, Indigenous People, and People of Color in this country. We would recognize the wrong of these systems and we would do the hard work of dismantling them, so that our brothers and sisters of color could breathe too.

I've had trouble breathing in recent months because of a virus that I had no control over. George Floyd couldn't breathe because a man literally knelt on his neck and cut off his breath.

I am here with you because I have access to health care. I haven't had to worry about losing my job or where I would live. I've had love and support and prayer every step of my way. But everyone doesn't have the privileges that I do. This virus disproportionately affects marginalized communities. Our friends in the Navajo Nation have been devastated by it. And closer to home, communities in our diocese on the Eastern Shore.

Please listen. This is about who we are as Christians, baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, beloved children of God. This isn't about feeling guilt and shame. We're not personally responsible for these individual deaths. We didn't pull the triggers or kneel on someone's neck. We are not bad people – remember, original goodness. God created us good.

But we are good people who have benefited from systems of racism and oppression. We just don't have to think about it every day. Our privilege is like our breath, we can take it for granted.

We can also allow God's breath to transform our hearts and our minds. We can acknowledge that we have benefited from oppressive systems. We don't have to have owned slaves to have benefited from slavery. We can learn whose land we live on – other people lived here before us – who were they? We can learn our history – not just the history of people who look like me but

also the history of people who look like Deacon Jan. Here at Bruton we are in a unique place to be part of the healing of our racial history.

We can confess our part. We can listen to the stories of those who have experienced racism without defending ourselves or making it about us.

We can have conversations about race in which we examine our own bias.

We can be part of God's healing and reconciliation.

We can act – to change laws, to organize in the community, to form a country where there really is liberty and justice for all. A country where everyone can breathe.

Dismantling systems isn't done easily or quickly. We have to be in it for the long haul. That can be discouraging. Fortunately, God has promised to be in it with us. Breathing life into us, breathing hope into us, breathing strength into us, breathing love into us. All of that to be shared with others as God has shared with us.

My friends, we can do our small part with humility and love. We can be part of the healing, but only if we allow ourselves to be transformed in the process.

We are created in the image of God, our loving, healing God who is with us to the end of the age.

We are not alone.

Blessed be our God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.