

Breath of God

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Acts 2:1-11

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

The Holy Spirit is the forgotten member of the Trinity.

When Bill Clinton was president, he gave a speech at a nursing home to promote legislation advantageous to seniors. Afterwards, he greeted some of the residents of this nursing home. One woman, seated in her wheelchair, stared blankly out the window and seemed to have little interest in meeting the president. So President Clinton patted her on the shoulder and said confidently, "Ma'am, do you know who I am?" The woman replied, "No I don't, but if you go to that nurses' station over there, they can tell you who you are."

The Bible urges us to practice the sacred art of remembering. I can remember my parents telling me when I was a teenager, "Now, Peter, when you go out, we want you to remember who you are." Abraham Heschel, one of the most significant Jewish theologians of the 20th century, claims that "...much of what the Bible demands can be summed up in one word—Remember!"

We want you to remember God's Big Story of creation, fall and redemption. We have been created for relationship with God. Sin, however, causes us to fall out of relationship with God. So God seeks to redeem our relationship through Jesus Christ. God creates. Sin destroys. God restores.

We declared earlier in the Nicene Creed, "I believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth... And in one Lord Jesus Christ, only-begotten Son of God." The first two members of the Trinity are described in familial, anthropomorphic language, but there is no comparable language for the third member of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the forgotten member of the Trinity. Many churches and Christians ignore the Spirit's work. God the Father and Jesus the Son take up residence in our lives through the Holy Spirit. God breathes His presence into us through the Spirit

There is one thing everybody is doing right now. I wish I could say it was listening to my sermon, but I know better. The one thing everybody is doing right now is breathing. Each minute, we draw 12-20 breaths of air into our lungs. That translates into ten million breaths of air every year.

God has perfectly engineered the human body for breathing. Our bodies are made in such a way that we don't even have to think about breathing. When our bodies require more oxygen, we don't even have to think about it. Our chest cavity expands automatically through the action of the diaphragm to inhale air into our nostrils and throat cavity. This action serves to filter the air and guards against infectious

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diseases. As the air moves through our larynx and windpipe, it is warmed or cooled to body temperature. This air is then directed through bronchial tubes to our lungs. Once the air reaches our lungs, it is circulated to a million small passageways called bronchiole, delivering oxygen to 300 million alveoli sacs, releasing oxygen into the bloodstream. Oxygen in the bloodstream fuels every cellular process in the human body. In the words of the Psalmist, “we are fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:4).

When God fashions man from the dust of the ground in Genesis, God breathes into Adam the breath of life (2:7). The Hebrew word for breath, ruach, can also be translated as wind or spirit. Even the word phonetically communicates the sound of breath. You can’t say the word ruach without exhaling. God’s Spirit breathes life into Adam and Eve. God’s breath gives life.

God breathes life into Jesus’ crucified body and resuscitates him to life again. When Jesus appears in resurrected form, he, in turn, breathes on his disciples saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (20:22). The Greek word for breath, pneuma, like its Hebrew counterpart, suggests wind or spirit. The same God who breathes life into Adam and Eve now breathes His Spirit into people.

Jesus said to Nicodemus, “The wind blows where it wills and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with

everyone born of the Spirit” (John 3:8).

The Spirit of God blows wherever it wills. We cannot control or manipulate the Spirit, like a genie in a bottle. God is wonderfully free to dispense the Holy Spirit to whom-ever He wills.

We began earlier this month a sermon series on the book of Acts. Jesus told his disciples at the outset of Acts to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit (1:4). At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit comes as the rush of mighty wind (2:2). God’s Spirit breathes life into these once timid disciples and transforms them into bold witnesses for Jesus Christ. The Spirit bestows on Jesus’ disciples the ability to speak in foreign languages. The people gathered for the festival of Pentecost, also called the feast of harvest (Exodus 23:16), to hear the good news of salvation in their native tongues. Three thousand people become followers of Jesus that day. That’s a harvest of a different sort: a harvest of people.

God breathes His Spirit into every follower of Jesus. The Holy Spirit is not the exclusive possession of super spiritual people. The Spirit in the Old Testament is given to select people—artisans, kings, prophets and priests. But in the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is the possession of everyone who asks.

When you open your life to the presence of God and you commit yourself to following Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit takes up residence in you. Julie Kellersberger writes, “Do not pray for more of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not come to people piecemeal. If you profess

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-Julie Kellersberger

Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you have been given the Holy Spirit as a gift. Every true believer has all the Spirit. The real question is whether the Holy Spirit has all of us.”

Our central ambition as a church, pure and simple, is to be filled with the Spirit. The question is not whether we have all the Spirit, it’s whether the Spirit has all of us.

The anthem our choir sang earlier in worship was commissioned as part of a larger musical composition by a former member of our church, now deceased, Freddie Coulter. Freddie commissioned this piece to tell her own Pentecost experience. Following surgery, Freddie’s body began to shut down and she lapsed into a deep coma for six weeks. In her comatose state, the hymn, *Breathe on Me, Breath of God*, continued to replay in her mind. The music playing in her room had no correlation to the hymn that came to her. Indeed, she hadn’t sung the song for years, but she could remember all four verses, clear as day. “Breathe on me, Breathe of God, Till I am wholly Thine, Until this earthly part of me Glows with the fire divine.”

Freddie didn’t know it at the time, but she was being kept alive by means of a respirator. “Breathe on me, breath of God. Fill me with life anew.”

I’ve been reading the Old Testament book of Ezekiel recently. This week’s reading included the 37th chapter. God leads Ezekiel by the Spirit into a valley

of dry bones (37:1). These bones are very dry, the narrator tells us (37:2). They must have been in this graveyard a long time. The Lord asks Ezekiel, “Son of man, can these bones live?” (37:3). Ezekiel puts the question back on God. “You tell me, sovereign Lord, you tell me.”

God commissions Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones. “Preach to these bones and say to them: ‘O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord’” (37:4). Often I officiate at funerals in Arlington Cemetery. What would happen if I stood on a bench and started preaching to the headstones? “O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.” Surely, people in little white coats would come along and take me away.

Ezekiel preaches, “Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live” (37:5). The Hebrew word *ruach*, translated breath, wind or Spirit, appears 14 times within a span of 10 verses.

Ezekiel does as he is told. “I preached as I had been commanded; and as I preached, suddenly, there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone on bone” (37:7). Every time I read these words, the Negro spiritual *Dem Dry Bones* comes to mind. “The toe bone’s connected to the foot bone. The foot bone’s connected to the ankle bone. The ankle bone’s connected to the shin bone.” And so it goes through the remainder of the skeletal structure.

But there is, as yet, no breath in the bones. So God says to Ezekiel a second time, “Preach to the breath; preach, Son of Man and say to the

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breath: Thus says the Lord. Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain that they may live. I preached as he commanded me; the breath came into them and they came to life and stood on their feet, a vast multitude” (37:9-10).

We’re told, in subsequent verses, these dry bones represent the exiled people of God (37:11-14). Their homes had been repossessed and they were living like slaves. “Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone, we are cut off.” No wonder the African slaves shipped to America picked up on their theme of exile when they sang this spiritual in the plantation cotton fields.

You may be wondering right now, “Can these bones live?” “Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord...I will make breath enter you and you will come to life.” But Lord, my hope is gone and I’m cut off completely. How can we get our hope back? “Come from the four winds, O Spirit, and breathe into us, that we may live.”

You may be experiencing depression or melancholy right now. You may have lost a job or be facing major health concerns. You may find yourself longing for a mate or a better marriage. Your heart may be heavy with grief or facing a disappointment of some kind. Let God breathe new life into you. “Breathe on me, breathe of God, Fill me with life anew.”

