

The Breath of God – The Life of the World

From the Eastertide sermon series: Credo

Text: Genesis 1:2; Ezekiel 37:5; John 3:8

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

"... a mighty wind (Spirit) that swept over the surface of the waters." Genesis 1:2

"I will put my breath (wind, spirit) in you and you shall live." Ezekiel 37:5

"The wind blows where it wills; you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. So with everyone who is born from Spirit." John 3:8

I have a very simple but a very wonderful word to share with you today on this Pentecost Sunday. I want to say to you that the breath of God is the life of the world. You've been around with me long enough to know that "the breath of God" is simply another way of saying "the spirit of God" or "the wind of God." For the Hebrew word *Ruach* means "spirit" or "wind" or "breath". In the Hebrew it has that enlivening, energizing vitality about it: the wind as a tempest, the wind as moving power, the wind as energy. It was the *Ruach* of God in the story of creation that shaped the cosmos. As we said earlier today at the baptismal font, it was the breath of God moving through the chaos, bringing creation to its fullness. It was the *Ruach* of God that caused Israel to have hope in its exile, the *Ruach* of God which caused the dry bones to come together in that vision of Ezekiel, that vision which spoke in metaphor of God's promise that that exiled people would come to life again. Then resurrection so to speak, would be through the *Ruach* of God. It was the *Ruach* of God or the breath of God that breathed, which blew through Mary and caused the Word to take on flesh and to dwell among us. And on the day of Pentecost that *Ruach*, spirit wind of God, rushed through that early community of the followers of Jesus turning them inside out and sending them out into the world.

The unfortunate thing for us is that the Hebrew word *Ruach* that had about it this energy and vitality was translated into the Latin *vispiritus*, and into English by the word *spirit*. And for us, the word spirit is intangible. It's invisible. It's kind of ghostlike. In fact, the German translation is *gist* and we even speak in an older form of the Apostles Creed of the Holy *Ghost*. So there is something spooky about it, something intangible about it – quite the opposite of the imagery of the Hebrew word *Ruach*.

What I want to say to you this morning is that it is that breath of God or that wind of God that gives life to the world, to all that is. Psalm One Hundred and Four, I said, is such a beautiful poem because it makes that point that every living thing – snails, and worms, and grubs, and birds, and the animals of the field, and the trees of the forest, and the meadows, and the skies, and the seas, and ourselves – is alive with the life of God!

It seems that in the modern age, since the Enlightenment, with all of the past accomplishments of the natural scientists and the explosion of technology, there has come into our lives a compartmentalization, a division, so that we do this on Sunday and then go out to the rest of the week to do our lives where life really is. Others have no moment like this hour of worship, because life for them is lived altogether outside the sanctuary, and they're getting along just fine. Human powers, human ingenuity, technology, scientific experiment, production, the corporate world, all of that going on without any reference to God. There we live a profane life.

Profane means, literally, outside the temple. We come into the temple, then we speak of the sacred. And to this day in life, there has been that distinction between the sacred and the profane. What I want to say to you this morning is that the celebration of the sacred, such as we do today, is in order to recognize the sacredness of the whole of life.

But what has happened in our modern western civilization, western culture, is that the vast majority of our brothers and sisters live a purely secular life without any reference, without any recognition that it is the breathing of God that keeps all things in being.

Someone from the outside could say to me, "We don't need God. That's just a hypothesis. The world is just a phenomenon that's there. It's just an accident the way things have developed. We can live purely out of our own resources." And I have to answer that is as reasonable as what I am claiming. But I'm claiming the opposite. I'm claiming that everything that is, is because God keeps breathing. As the Psalmist said, "God withholds God's breath and they wither and return to the dust. God breathes and they are created and renewed." That goes not simply for some spiritual realm of our human experience, but that goes for our bodies. That goes for our physical universe, our natural world, for the totality of reality. It is all God-breathed, moment-by-moment incessantly. God holds all things together. And we live and we celebrate and we can delight in the totality of it because it is all a consequence of the breath of God. On this Pentecost hear me say that I believe the breath of God is the life of the world.

I had an experience recently on a beautiful morning, much like this morning. I had to go into Grand Rapids for breakfast. I came down Route 45 to Allendale, to Eastmanville, and then took Leonard Road into Grand Rapids. And if you haven't taken that route recently, do it again. It courses through valleys. There are wonderful green hills. That day the trees were coming out in marvelous blossom.

There were jonquils and farmyards. There were cattle staring at me with those large eyes. And because it was still cool at that hour, their breath was causing a bit of a vapor, almost a kind of mystical something in that morning light. It was a brilliant, shining morning. I had my sunroof open. The fresh air came in. After the long Michigan winter, I said, "Dear God this is it! Spring has come!" And when I began to tell somebody about it, I said, "It was *almost* a spiritual experience", when as a matter of fact it was *precisely* a spiritual experience. It was exactly a religious experience because a spiritual or religious experience is simply the experience of the world in the conscious awareness of the breathing of God that makes it all possible and invites us to delight in it.

I had another experience, not too long ago while I was on vacation. It was Sunday afternoon, on a Florida intercostal down in Marco Island. It was a ramshackle, broken-down, old, beat-up tavern scene, the kind of place where you find yourself a small table under a little thatched palm roof to keep out of the sun. Tied up to the nearby docks people were eating brats and hot dogs and there was a musical group (though not nearly as good as the Weideman family but with a certain similarity!) and the people washing down excessive numbers of brats and hot dogs with excessive liquids of various kinds. They had tied their boats together, "rafting" out from one another as it's called.

I looked at that scene and I said to myself, "Dear God, in the church, we are missing it. We few Christians coming together decrying the worldliness of the world and the unspirituality of people. We are growing smaller and smaller, and it's getting tougher and tougher, and we have to shout louder and louder, and run faster and faster. And I thought, "We're missing it." What we ought to do is not simply invite people next weekend to come "casually" (for a casual Sunday) into the sanctuary, What we ought to do is all go to the shores of Lake Michigan somewhere and have a "kegger", and some hot dogs, and a hot band. Then at some point, give me just ten minutes. Give me just ten minutes for me to tell them that all of this sand dune, and sky, and sea, and the wonder of the world is all there to be enjoyed and be delighted in because God keeps breathing. It isn't an accident. It can't be taken for granted. It ought not to be presumed upon. We don't need to retreat to the temple to feel God's breath! If only we are aware, in that moment, that all that surrounds us is enlivened by God!

A moment of awareness, that's what prayer is. A moment of attention, that's what prayer is. Attention and awareness to the breathing of God in a jonquil, in a tulip, in the forsythia, in sand, in sky, in food and friends. It should cause us to wonder and worship because the breath of God is the life of the world. Rather than living out in the world by my wits as best I can and sneaking into church on the weekend to be refueled, I ought to come here to this sanctuary to do sacred things, in sacred space, in order to go out and to see that all of space, and all of life and all of its lusty delight is the gift of God who keeps breathing, and breathing, energizing, vitalizing, enlivening us to be fully human, all to the glory of God. Isn't that wonderful?