

One of my favorite words or images in scripture is *ruach*: God's creative breath. It's the breath or wind that sweeps over boggy waters and a formless void in Genesis and produces light; I think it's the same breath that inhabits the first earth creatures in the garden, not to mention all of their animal, insect, and plant-based companions; it's the same breath that animates Lady Wisdom; the same substance John's gospel calls the Word. It is the energy of a compassionate, invested, thoughtful, imaginative creator. It's the divine energy that inhabits each of us.

Of course, this language is so cosmic and so mysterious, and all of us being so young in the grand scheme of the universe, we can barely grasp the slightest inkling of the earth's earliest days. So lately, my mind has been filled with more tangible and practical examples of God's *ruach*.

My little girls play with chalk and crayons, and sometimes, I wish it was more, but sometimes, those chalk and crayons actually make it onto colorful construction paper instead of the kitchen table, the bedroom walls, or the family checkbook. And when my little artists are especially connected to their drawings, I notice the slightest breath (*motions and mimics that breath*), used with care to move excess flakes of wax and dust off of their burgeoning masterpieces. Or sometimes, when we make hot chocolate together in the morning, or perhaps when we warm up soup for lunch or dinner, I notice their little lips, ovaled with precision, as they blow a few careful breaths to transform piping hot liquid into Goldilocks-like delight.

Sometimes, my little girls fall and skin their knees, an unavoidable side effect of exploration and childhood. And I watch their mama scoop them up, and offer needed care, and in the more traumatic of instances, she blows a creative, healing breath of affection upon the afflicted area – it's the elixir that only a vested parent can offer. And my girls aren't old enough yet, but I am sure that one day soon, just like their older cousins, they'll learn to read and write, and with such skills they'll journal with #2 pencil and pad. And as I see them writing, I see an image of dexterous hands using a rubber eraser to wipe away a good, but not yet perfect word; a little *ruach* will soon scatter those eraser shavings, and a right word, a careful word, a created word will emerge.

Of course I see other forms of ruach, too. I notice our choir each Sunday, as well as our instrumentalists, as they fashion breath, with lots of practice and hard work, into created rhythms, songs, and prayers. I hear the more consistent, less measured breathing of our building and grounds committee, not panting, but definitely more exerted than normal, as they break soil to till the Garden of Sardis. I hear the anxious breath, it's a healthy anxious, of a congregation steadying itself, perhaps before a phone call, or a home visit, or hospital visit, to speak a word of God's hope and encouragement to someone who needs to hear it. And I hear the breath of chaplains, who in these trying days, share sacred space with neighbors who breathe in and out their last breaths of God's spirit.

On this Pentecost Sunday, I am grateful to be aware of God's ruach in the ordinary spaces of my life. But truth be told, I am also significantly overwhelmed when I begin to think in broader terms about God's spirit channeled in breath. This anxiety manifests itself for me in two unique ways.

First, we find ourselves in an extraordinary moment of history – the very breath that gives us life, animates us, fills us, defines us, is vital to our existence, is also, in this age of COVID-19, the very thing that threatens our wellbeing. A respiratory virus, transferred by air-borne normalcies like talking, singing, yawning, laughing, and yes, breathing. How does the famous hymn strike you now, even metaphorically?!?

Breathe on me, Breath of God,
Fill me with life anew,
That I may love what Thou dost love,
And do what Thou wouldst do.
(Edwin Hatch)

The second way that the image of God's breath gives me anxiety this morning, is when I think about the extraordinarily tragic, and all-too-common reality of violence being exerted upon people of color by authorities in every community, and veiled as justice. George Floyd's death, and especially the manner in which he died, is not an isolated incident. This act of oppression is not the first, and it certainly won't be the last. The apostles we read about this morning, are only a few weeks removed from the crucifixion of their friend – he too, literally had the

ruach choked from his body. And all we need to do is open a history book...even the most subjective of sources will remind us of a four-hundred-year pattern of the privileged trampling upon, seizing, choking out the ruach of the oppressed. And if I am honest, I wish to see myself as that Good Samaritan, who stops when others won't; but in my heart, I know that all too often, I've been like those who kept walking, because I worried what would happen if I stayed in such a vulnerable place. And the air is weighted and heavy with lament.

It's a scary, scary time, Sardis Baptist Church! It's too dangerous to exhale, but of course that assumes one is privileged enough to have the space to inhale.

Well, hard as it may seem to believe, I don't think the apostles were in too different a place than we are on that first Pentecost. Judea, a province of Rome, sure wasn't a safe place to exhale – they saw what happened when people sang, and proclaimed, and prayed, and spoke about a kingdom that didn't have an emperor. And there were plenty of folk whose right to breathe didn't exist. And I would venture to say that the movement of the spirit was tentative at best. Yes, I know last week's text, and the one the week before told us about a confident, exuberant group breaking bread, and praising God, and worshiping with zeal. But that was a pocket. The spirit didn't appear to be prowling around Jerusalem, and the people of the city certainly weren't behaving as if it was.

So Boom!!! We get an explosion, an earthquake, a rumbling – a mighty wind, not one that whistles, not one that howls, not one that just passes on by, but a mighty wind, a wind that's here to stay, a wind that makes you take notice. And fire, flaming tongues, smoke, and heat, and light, a combustible canister of energy...this was a reminder, a reorientation, a relighting of God's furnace.

Now, I think a lot of times, we get too caught up in this combustion. It's important, for sure. It's an enzyme, and a catalyst, an important visual. The spirit, the creative breath had always been there, but it was announcing its presence with tangible authority. Just in case you didn't know, now you know.

But of course, the larger miracle of the text is the ability of a diverse, really, really, really diverse audience, think Star Trek diverse, a diverse group of people to experience, interpret, and express God's spirit in their own native tongues. *The*

Good Place glosses over this – Chidi speaks in French, Eleanor speaks in English, Michael speaks a divine tongue, but somehow they all hear one another in their own tongue. But today, this isn't just three people communicating, this is thousands of people. This is simply remarkable.

And I don't know about you, but this is an image I desperately need to cling to this morning. Because if long ago, God can find a way to let cultures, ancient, modern, and not-yet-existent communicate with, empathize with, and understand one another, then God can do the same today. The spirit of God can not only transcend language and culture, but it can also transcend attitude, hard-heartedness, brokenness, grief, depression, class, ignorance, technology, racism, and any other barrier that divides us.

2020 has been strange, painful, and disruptive. We didn't get the Easter we wanted. We didn't get Madness in March, nor graduations in May, nor a quick fix to hard problems. And we certainly didn't get the Pentecost we expected.

But we did get fire. Flames of grief, and exhaustion, and rage have been stoked in the fires of protest in cities near and far. And we have received a mighty wind. The winds of change are beckoning us to reconsider how we will define safety, belonging, economy, commerce, church, justice, what it means to be human, and so much more in the days and weeks to come. And we need to realize, that even in a fire and wind we may not have longed for nor expected, God's spirit, God's ruach is still present.

And the question for us today is, will we use this newfound flame and wind to make us more aware of the ruach that inhabits all of our neighbors, especially the most vulnerable, the most oppressed, the most un-named?

Is there ruach in rage? Is there ruach in lament? Is there ruach in change? Is there ruach in social distancing? Is there ruach in humanity? Is there ruach in people who express desires in ways that our privilege confuses as irresponsible, or unfounded, or unjust?

I think Pentecost started early this week, because I think what all of these protests are trying to tell our stubborn and hardened hearts is this: there was and

there will always be ruach in God's beloved, beautiful creatures with beautiful names: George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Emmett Till, the list goes on. And as we watch storefronts and other inanimate buildings burn or be vandalized, we need to take note of what we're grieving...Is it the loss of God's beloved, or is it the assault on privileges that ensure systemic injustice? How many black and brown bodies are expendable in the defense of these privileges? And how much more value do we place on Caesar's brick and mortar than God's ruach?

I think, if we experience today's flame and wind, really experience it...I think that means we also begin to see that God's ruach inhabits the bodies of so many we've made invisible. And don't forget, God didn't breathe spirit into each of us in order that we might hold our breath. God breathed spirit into each of us, so that we might exhale our own manifestation of the spirit in the world, to be shared with one another.

Friends, God's ruach is among us: blowing on skinned knees, cooling hot soup, crafting healing words, embracing neighbors, undergirding endurance for justice-marchers, releasing the pent up tears and sobs of struggles, shame, and song, dreaming the dreams, seeing the visions, prophesying the proclamations of young women and men, old men and women, and every age and shape in between.

God on this Day of Pentecost, may we breathe in your spirit, so that we might breathe out your justice, love, and mercy in the world. And may the flames of Pentecost illumine your ruach in our neighbors, and the winds of Pentecost, swirl our collective gifts and spirits into your faithful, connected, imaginative, loving people.

May it be so! And may it be soon!

Amen.