

## Connecting with God: breath

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Think about what you just did: you took a breath. Human beings take approximately 23,000 breaths a day and most of them we never notice. Maybe when you smell a particularly good scent—a rose, a steak on the grill or bread baking in the oven, even the air after a rain – then we notice taking a breath. When we're having an attack of asthma or allergies or emphysema and we CAN'T breathe, we definitely notice that. Breathing sustains us in every moment, but most of the time, it's an unnoticed blessing—kind of like God's presence.

All the way through the Bible, breath is used to describe the God's Spirit as it comes to creation, giving life and power. The word *spirit* in both Hebrew and Greek is the same as the word for breath or wind, so in Genesis, the wind of God's spirit stirs creation into being, and God breathes life into the first human beings. God "inspires," breathes into, prophets, leaders and the writers of scripture, so that they are not transcribing dictated words but are guided by God's Spirit. The resurrected Jesus appears to the disciples in the upper room and breathes on them, saying "Receive the Holy Spirit," giving them the authority to lead the Christian community. The wind of the Spirit comes to empower the Christian community itself on the day of Pentecost.

I think it's significant that the signs of the Spirit in scripture—fire and the dove—both depend on air. Birds don't just fly on their own wing power; they're dependent on air currents to carry them along. A fire without air goes out, but wind fans the flames. That should tell us something about our own need for God's breath in us, not just physically but spiritually. How can we keep going in this world, how can we face the challenges and live with grace, unless we have spiritual support?

We see that in one of my favorite Biblical stories, Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones. Ezekiel was a priest in Jerusalem when the Babylonians swept in to conquer the city and carry the citizens away as captives. Ezekiel did his work in exile, ministering to a traumatized community. They had witnessed the brutality of war and lost loved ones to massacres; how could they go on in this strange new place with their own city fallen, their temple in ruins? Where was God? Like victims of Post-traumatic stress, they were dazed and demoralized. They could not pull themselves together.

Ezekiel's vision captures this so clearly: a valley full of bones, skeletal remains like people they would have seen by the side of the road as they left Israel to go into exile, and God's voice asking "Can these dead bones live?" God says "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say 'our bones are dried up and our hope is lost.'" Then God says to Ezekiel, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Hear the word of the Lord: I will cause breath (or spirit, remember, same word) to enter you and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and cause flesh to come upon you and cover you with skin, and I will put breath in you and you shall live and you shall know that I am the Lord.'" Ezekiel begins to prophesy and those very things happen, a rattling of bones coming together and human forms appearing. God tells Ezekiel to summon the breath

from the four winds to breathe upon these slain that they may live. The breath came into them and they stood on their feet, a vast multitude.”

Amazing. But so often we just pay attention to the visual drama that we miss the point: people who could not pull themselves together are pulled together by God. A shattered community is made whole by God’s spirit that is in each one of us. That’s a vision we need as a people to come together as one body and it’s a vision we need as individuals to keep us going as we do our part of that work.

Years ago, I read a great article that was called “Becoming spiritual in self-defense.” It was by a man who had become disillusioned with organized religion but then found that the whole secular, self-help culture was just not cutting it for him. Like Rachel Held Evans in her book, he found himself longing for something deeper, some more ancient awareness that at the center of existence is not a vacuum that we have to fill ourselves, but a source of love and power that can sustain us. He discovered spiritual practice, consciously opening himself to God’s spirit, as self-defense.

So what does it look like to live with some kind of open connection to the spirit? Well, I can tell you what it’s NOT and that’s some easy three step formula; it’s NOT something you obtain and then pull out when you need it; it’s not an achievement. My experience of the spiritual is that it’s much more mysterious than that. It’s the sense that you’re onto something, not the conviction that you have it in the bag, as if God is something we can possess.

The spiritual life is more like a journey, which as Rachel Held Evans says, is kind of cliché but the metaphor holds. “Scripture doesn’t speak of people who found God but of people who walked with God.” You can’t see very far ahead of you, but it’s “more like a labyrinth than a maze because a labyrinth has no dead ends. No step taken in faith is wasted, not by a God who makes all things new.”

Part of this journey is just paying attention to all the ways God is around you, all the shapes in which God surprises you. I read recently something about that the verse in Micah that says “walk humbly with your God.” Humbly can also be translated “watchfully.” We’re not striding ahead as if we already know where we’re going, we’re not walking on autopilot with our head down, thinking of something else. We’re walking watchfully, eyes open to what’s around us and alert to what God might be up to.

I was in a covenant group in seminary where each week we were to report where we had perceived God at work that week, not only in our personal lives but in the news, in the world. That’s a practice will help you keep your eyes open!

Paying attention means realizing that people who are very different from you can also be close to God. Sometimes the variety of Christian denominations and churches seems crazy and makes us prone to argue, but it’s a reminder that God defies our categorizing. No church or tradition is perfect; Rachel quotes a friend’s comment that “when you join a church you’re just picking which hot mess is your favorite.” She goes

on "our differences matter but ultimately the boundaries between us are but accidental fences in the endless continuum of God's grace."

That's important to remember because this journey with God can get uncomfortable. For me, it's a growing conviction that our new presidential administration is taking actions that are contrary to the teachings of Jesus Christ, especially in the treatment of Muslims and this weekend the turning away of Syrian refugees. I can't just sit on my comfortable sofa and say "oh that's terrible." So I'm going to be protesting and giving money and taking actions to protect vulnerable people. And I hope you'll pray about your own response.

This journey with God can be uncomfortable in another way as well: times full of doubts and questions, times of feeling that you've lost sight of God, wondering whether you really have enough faith to call yourself a Christian. Rachel Held Evans tells a story about a 12-year-old girl preparing to be confirmed. She told her father, who was the pastor of her church, that she wasn't sure she could go through with it. She wasn't sure she believed everything she was supposed to believe, at least not enough to make a promise before God and her congregation to believe those things for ever. Her father told her, "what you promise when you're confirmed is not that you will believe exactly these things forever. What you promise is that this is the story you will wrestle with forever." (RHE 194)

I like that. The generous grace of God gives us room to wrestle, like Jacob wrestled with God in that Old Testament story and came away with a blessing. God gives us room to walk and walks with us, and gives us breath, spirit to sustain us. God shows us the spirit at work all around us. We know it by its fruits.

- Love in a little church family that hosted and paid for a wedding for a young couple whose parents weren't in the picture,
- Peace in a Palestinian man and an Israeli woman joining forces to work for an end to violence
- Self-control in people who keep on serving with love even those who reject them.

God's spirit is at work like a breath moving through every place and every people on this earth, to revive us for the life God calls us to share. And we get to be part of it. Let us pray.

Quotations are from Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, Thomas Nelson, publisher, 2015.