



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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BAPTISM OF OUR LORD, JANUARY 7, 2024
GENESIS 1:1-5, ACTS 19:1-7, PSALM 29, MARK 1:4-11

BREATH OF GOD



Design for fresco in the Sanctuary of Monte Sant'Angelo, Mount Gargano, Italy, by Ioan (John) Popa (Romanian, 1976–) and Camelia Ionesco-Popa (Romanian, 1979–), 2003

Mark 1:4-11 [*John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*]

Genesis 1:1-5 [*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let*

there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.]

Imagine you are one of the followers of John the Baptist, a witness to this gospel scene. You've journeyed east from Jerusalem to the Jordan River, walking the better part of a day. You've heard John's passionate call to return to God and to mark a commitment to that with baptism. You've heard him speak of a mighty person to come, one whose power comes not from social clout or material wealth, but spiritual wisdom and strength. You want to know more.

Then, today, with your hair still wet from your own baptism in the river, you see a stranger from Galilee approach John and ask to be baptized. John speaks to him with respect and deference but is hesitant to bestow this blessing, asking to be baptized by him instead. But the man insists, and so John baptizes him.

As the man emerges from the water, the clouds move above him and the light abruptly changes. You see him look intently into the distance, his face opening with deep recognition. You hear a sound like thunder and everyone stands still. Someone whispers, "I

think that was the voice of God. This must be the one."

Later, by the fire, you approach the man and ask him, "What happened after you were baptized? He is quiet for a moment and then says with a sense of wonder, "It was like a dove came and *hovered* over me – I could almost feel the air move like wings flapping! And then something shifted in me. I know that I am beloved by God."

Maybe you feel shivers, because you are well acquainted with the Hebrew scriptures, and know the opening verses of Genesis: "*When God began to create heaven and earth, and the earth then was welter and waste and darkness over the deep and God's breath hovering over the waters, God said, "Let there be light."*¹

The rabbis describe this hovering breath of God – *ruach* – as like a dove brooding over her young. Is this a sign of a new creation?

You also know the story of Noah and the great flood. How he and his family understood the world was made new when the dove returned

¹ Gen 1:1-3, Robert Alter translation.

to the ark holding an olive leaf. Doves mean reconciliation with God, and peace. Is that what this man Jesus is about? You are drawn to learn more about him and the God who loves him.

So, you become his disciple, and your world turns upside down, and you learn about love and integrity and sacrifice and death and stunning new life and you come to know you are beloved, too. You tell this story to your children and grandchildren and maybe one of them writes it down for the first time under the name of Mark, and it is read with joy two thousand years later in a cathedral in Seattle on the day that seven children are baptized.

It could be. That's the way the Holy Spirit works.

In the Christian tradition, we speak of God as Trinitarian – three modes of revelation of the single Holy One who is beyond time, language, and understanding.

First, God the Creator, known as God the Father because Jesus called him “Abba,” or “Daddy.” Over the centuries, theologians and mystics and everyday people have also known this same person of God as Mother, Lover, Giver of Life.

Then there is the Son, Jesus, the human incarnation of God. Also known as Emmanuel, Redeemer, Teacher, Beloved.

And the third is the Holy Spirit. In Jewish tradition, as Deacon Earl pointed out last week, God's spirit, God's essence, is the feminine word *ruach*, the wind from God that sweeps over the face of the waters at Creation.

Also translated as the “breath” of God, the feminine word *pneuma* in Greek, used for the Holy Spirit in the second reading today, when Paul baptizes people in Corinth and they are transformed with insight and power to speak about God. This is the same breath – the same *ruach* -- that enlivens the dry bones in Ezekiel's vision and the same *pneuma* that the risen Christ breathes on the disciples at Pentecost.

The Holy Spirit can seem elusive compared to Jesus or the Creator. But she is always present and can be known in our physical existence. God is as close to us as our own breath. Our word “spirituality” comes from the word “spirit,” just as “inspiration” and “respiration” do.

To embrace and cultivate a spirituality then, is quite literally to breathe in the divine life, to take God into one's own body like breath, to be “in-spirited.”

Think about all the ways we know the importance of breath, how it can calm and recenter us. When someone is surprised or afraid, we say, “Take a deep breath.” Many yoga practices are centered on the breath. When women prepare to give birth, we learn to breathe with intention so that we can stay focused on the labor at hand. The power of breath is not a new thing.

In the early third century, the desert mothers and fathers developed a contemplative practice called breath prayer. We still practice it. Breathing in, we silently say a name of God. Breathing out, we express our desire or need to God. Like this, “[inhale] Holy One, [exhale] bring peace.”

Or just simply focus on your breath and imagine, “Breathe in Love. Breathe out Peace” (or whatever need to bring to God). When we make our breathing a prayer, we are praying without ceasing, even though we may not be conscious of it. Our lives are nourished with God’s own breath.

The Holy Spirit has been symbolized since the early days of the church as a dove, but don’t be fooled. The Spirit is not domesticated, cozy or comfortable. It can be tender and gentle, holding one who grieves as they struggle to imagine life after the death of a loved one.

But the Holy Spirit can be fierce and overpowering, too. Remember, it is also symbolized by fire. The Holy Spirit moves in mysterious ways, inspiring people to take risks and speak truth to power. To call out injustice, prejudice, and oppression, for example. And to act on it!

We can’t predict or control this breath of God, and sometimes we only recognize it after it has cleared the room.

In just a moment, we will baptize Nathan and Cooper (or Evie, Theo, Spencer, Julia, and Jasper) in the name of the Trinitarian God. They will be sealed by the Holy Spirit with chrism and named as Christ’s own forever.

We do this in community because we will also renew our baptismal vows and we will make promises to support these children on their spiritual journey.

So, when you feel the water sprinkled on you, remember your baptism. Remember that you are God’s beloved, that God’s breath in-spirits you, filling you with courage and grace so that you can exhale in love and peace.

That is how the Holy Spirit works.

Amen.