

REFLECTION FOR MONDAY SECOND WEEK OF EASTER 2021

Acts 4:23-31 John 3:1-8

I must have been 5 years old. I was sick. I had a cold. I coughed a lot; my nose was stuffed up and I could not breathe.

Before bedtime, my mom made me hot tea. She told me that she put honey in it. I later found out that she had actually put blackberry brandy in my tea to make me sleep!

Later, I woke up and sensed that Mom was asleep beside me on the couch. In the quiet of that room, I could hear and feel her breathing.

As a little boy, that was one of the most comforting feelings I'd ever had. The sound of her breath made me feel peace.

Spouses tell me that they find a certain comfort when they wake up and hear their spouse breathing (or snoring?).

Parents tell me that they experience an overwhelming sense of love when their children fall asleep and they hear their children breathing.

These are peaceful, powerful experiences... all caused by something as gentle and quiet as a breath.

Old Testament scholars teach us that there is an important Hebrew word that we should be attentive to. That word is "ruah." And that word means three things: it means "breath," and it means "wind," and it means "spirit."

The same is true in the Greek of the New Testament. There, the word is "pneuma" (from which we get the word 'pneumonia'...) In Greek this word also means breath, or wind, or Spirit.

The people of the Bible were very practical. They observed that if you stop breathing, you die.

So they concluded that the breath is our life force. It is life and it's what keeps us alive.

Way back in the Book of Genesis, God fashions the first human being out of the dust of the earth. But Adam is not fully alive until God breathes life into Adam.

In fact, the 'ruah' – the breath of God, the spirit of God, the wind of God – is seen right at the beginning of Genesis. As God begins to create, everything is chaos. Then the breath/wind/spirit of God starts to become active, and creation begins to take shape.

In the Old Testament, The 'ruah' of God is God's Spirit – and when God breathes that Spirit into us, we are alive, because we share in God's life!

You may be wondering why I am doing such a detailed study of this word and its meaning. Well, Jesus says something very interesting to Nicodemus in today's gospel reading that if we want to participate in the Kingdom of God – that is, if we want to be part of the community who shares God's life by doing God's will on earth as it is in heaven – we must be 'born of water and the Spirit.'

Water – we get that. This is probably a reference to the invitation for us to be baptised as followers of Jesus.

But what does it mean to be born of the Spirit? How can we be born of the Spirit? Our mothers give birth to us. How does God's life come alive in us through the Holy Spirit?

Well, don't forget Adam. He did not fully come alive until God breathed life into him. Perhaps Jesus is saying that we can be physically alive day by day, but we will only be fully alive, living a life that has deep and lasting meaning, if we allow God's life, God's breath, to bring us to the fullness of life!

At the end of the passage, Jesus says that the Holy Spirit is like the wind. Jesus said, "you can't really see the wind... but you can hear the sound it makes." Did you catch that? Jesus points out that we cannot actually see the wind – but we can hear and see the effects of the wind.

Think of it this way: When you wake up in the morning, how do you know if the wind is blowing? Well, you can look out the window. If you see the leaves rustling on the trees, you know it's windy. You can see flags waving. You can see tree branches swaying. You can feel the wind on your skin. You cannot see the wind – but you can tell the wind is present by watching its effects.

And that, says Jesus, is how it is with the Holy Spirit. We cannot usually see the Holy Spirit. But you can tell the Spirit is nearby if you see certain effects.

Back in Genesis 1, the Spirit of God brought order out of chaos; it brought beauty out of confusion.

In Acts 2, the Holy Spirit brought about unity. The barriers that divide us comes down.

Also in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit made it possible for the disciples to do things that they thought they could not do. The Spirit gave them courage. In Acts, the Spirit enabled the first Christians to speak about God in a way that others can understand.

In John's Gospel, Jesus said that the Spirit would remind us of the truth and give us peace.

The Holy Spirit is like the wind. It's hard to see the Spirit, but if we pay attention we will be able to see the Spirit's effects, and we will know that the Spirit is at work, is nearby.

And don't we need the Holy Spirit now more than ever? Don't we need the Spirit to teach us how to bring order out of the chaos of our world; how to create something beautiful in the midst of our current difficult situation? That's what the Spirit did in Genesis. Don't we need the Spirit to work through us to do the same thing now?

In The Acts of the Apostles, the Spirit enabled the followers of Jesus to be courageous, to break down barriers, to create unity, to speak effectively about faith. In the midst of a pandemic, don't we need the Spirit to do that through us?

In John's Gospel, the Spirit taught people the truth and filled them with mercy and peace. In these stressful days, don't we need the Spirit to do the same for us and through us?

God's breath. God's Spirit. God's wind. "Ruah."

Sometimes the Holy Spirit is present, and acts in ways that knock us around, like a strong wind that catches us off guard.

Other times, the action of the Holy Spirit is as gentle as a calming breeze or a child's breath.

Sometimes, the truth the Spirit teaches us is as powerful as a storm, and other times the Spirit's wisdom comes to us like a whisper.

I suggest that we spend a few minutes each day in silence. Be attentive to the silence. Just sit in the silence. Listen in the silence – you may just hear the breath of your Father – the breath of God – the Spirit of the Risen One – in the midst of silence. And that breath will remind you that God is near, and you have nothing to fear.

Blessed are they who put their trust in God.

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