



*As Near as Your Next Breath*  
5/23/21 - Holy Eucharist Rite II for Pentecost: Whitsunday  
The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment  
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

*O Lord: Take our minds and think through them; take our mouths and speak through them; take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.*

This spring, I've been learning how to breathe again.

For eight weeks, for two hours every Thursday morning, I have been taking a course on Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). Based on the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn, who founded the Stress Reduction Clinic at UMass Medical Center in 1979, MBSR combines the insights of neurobiology, Buddhism, and yoga into a powerful set of practices to draw upon during the ups and downs of our everyday lives. As our teacher has been reminding us, "our lives are the curriculum."

Central to the practice is learning to be aware of one's breathing. It's actually harder than it seems, because breathing is one of those things that we usually don't have to think about. Unlike walking or talking, breathing is like the beating of your heart—ours brains just take care of it. Typically, it's only when we have *trouble* breathing that we are aware of its importance—so those who suffer from asthma or severe allergies and the like may be more likely to be aware of the importance of the breath: when we stop breathing, we die.

It's not usual for me, when I am feeling stress, to realize that I have stopped breathing. Conveniently, one of the mantras in the course is "return to the breath," whenever we feel anxiety rising. Interestingly, since beginning the course, I have found myself repeating "return to the breath," whenever I have experienced anxiety or fear.

Today is The Sunday of the Spirit; Pentecost. In the Church year, on this day we celebrate the public coming of the Holy Spirit, fifty days after Easter (Pentecost means "fiftieth" in Greek.) The great arc that began with ashes on Ash Wednesday concludes with flames of fire on Pentecost. Pentecost was originally, and still is, a major Jewish festival (now called Shavuot), held fifty days after Passover, which celebrated the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai, as well as the spring harvest. This is why there are Jews in Jerusalem from all over the Mediterranean world in this morning's reading from the Book of Acts. It was a pilgrimage festival. For Christians, it is the Birthday of the Church.

God's Spirit is the star of the day. Sometimes known as the shy member of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is on full display and is featured in all our readings.

The Hebrew word translated as "spirit" in Ezekiel this morning is the word *ruach*. It is a hugely rich and powerful word. It can also mean wind, or breath. Thus, it is God's breath that re-animates the bones in the Valley of the Dry Bones. It is the same word, the same *breath of God*, who broods over the formless void in the opening moments of creation, in the Book of Genesis. (Genesis 1.2)



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A few verses later, it's God's breath that turns a pile of dust into *Adam*, the first human. (Genesis 2.7) It's the same breath of God in the Psalm today, where we hear, "O God, you send forth your *ruach*, and you renew the face of the earth."

In the Greek in which the Book of Acts and the Gospel of John are written, the word translated as Spirit is *pneuma*, which comes from a root word meaning "to breath." This Greek word is also related to another root word meaning "to smell." Smell is the most ancient and basic of our senses. We detect smell even when we're asleep. Smell is deeply connected to memory.

The spirit of God has been as central to our lives as breathing itself since the world began.

And so, when the Spirit comes at Pentecost, it is new, and it isn't new. In our Scripture, the Spirit gathers together Jews from the diaspora from around the world, with Jews who have become Jesus followers.

As we come to what seems to be an inflection point in the pandemic, we know that God's Spirit is with us, because as a church, we are still breathing. And when we get anxious about our future, we remember to breath. And in breathing, we are reminded that God's breath is always within us, and always has been.

What will unfold in this next phase of our common life none of us can know precisely. We are planning to reopen for in person worship in our chapel and in the Main Sanctuary on June 13. The precise nature and timing of summer worship may change, though we are committed to continuing to the live stream for those who may not feel comfortable returning, for those with mobility challenges, or for those who are in on the cape or in other parts of the country.

But the Breath of God has shown us that the dispersal and disruption of the pandemic is not destruction. And we also know that regathering will not mean simply recapturing the past. We are needing to reimagine all kinds of things: what are programs for children and youth will look like; what coffee hour will look like; what our other programs will look like, when it will feel safe to fully reopen the building, and other questions.

And as we come together, we will share our stories of isolation as well as of community. We are all learning to breathe again; or rather, to remember to breathe.

Today we rejoice in the knowledge that in a very real way, every day is Pentecost, because the life-giving, Holy Spirit of God is always as near as our next breath.

**Amen.**