“Don’t forget to breathe.” - Stephanie Sorge, 5.28.23

“Don’t forget to breathe.” I’ve had that written on my dry erase board since March 10th, 2020. Right as life as we knew it was coming undone. It’s a reminder that I always need; many of us do. This reminder came to me at a time just before breathing itself felt like a risky thing. Never before had most of us been so aware of the air and breath we share.

Wind, breath, Spirit. Ruach in Hebrew. Pneuma and Pnoe in Greek. The breath of life. The Holy Spirit. When God breathes, when the Spirit moves, pay attention. Something big is happening. The spark of humanity. The first cry of a newborn savior. The birth of a church. Don’t forget to breathe.

Today is the last Sunday of this Narrative Lectionary cycle. We’ll pick it up again in September, with the creation story from Genesis 2. The one in which God enlivens humanity by breathing the breath of life into the nose. The one in which humans are given the instruction to till and keep the earth. To care for it. But here we are today, breathless, groaning alongside creation that awaits redemption.

Last week marked a year since the shooting in Uvalde. Last month brought us 24 years past Columbine, and 16 years past Virginia Tech. It’s too much to bear. Imagine, then, a mere eight weeks after the violent crucifixion of Jesus, the world is still turned upside down. In rushes the Holy Spirit, birthing something new, even out of death itself.

In traditions that encourage Bible verse memorization, Romans 8:28 is high on the list. All things work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to God’s Spirit. Then Paul gets into predestination. Many take this to mean that God has already determined all of the things that will happen in the world. That God intends for all of those things to happen. And that God desires and brings those things about in order to effect some greater good.

There’s a word that appears just once in the New Testament, and that’s in Luke’s resurrection account. When the women tell the disciples that they have seen the empty tomb, and that Jesus Christ is not dead, the disciples hear the news and deem it “leiros.” It’s translated as “an idle tale” or “silly talk” or “foolish nonsense,” but it really means BS. A word as vulgar in the gospel as it would be in a sermon, but Luke chooses it precisely for the weight.

The idea that God causes human suffering for some greater good is just that. Leiros. An ugly, detestable lie. When we are groaning, creation groans with us. The Spirit groans with us. And when we are beyond words, the Spirit intercedes for us, with sighs too deep for words.

Those sighs, that breath, the wind that came when the stench of Good Friday’s death still lingered - signify that God is with us, and that God is at work. Wresting new life from the jaws of death. Able to redeem and transform. Making something new even with the fertilizer of cow manure. God is not the master puppeteer, pulling the strings in some morality play. God is in the deepest groanings of creation, in the sighs and heaving of our souls when there are no words to say. Wind, breath, Spirit. Don’t forget to breathe.

It was a gift to be back at Montreat a few weeks ago. I try to work out regularly - with more or less success depending on how life unfolds - but leave it to Montreat to make me feel totally out of shape. Somehow, every destination in Montreat ends with an uphill climb. It’s a thin space with thin air. I was very aware of my breath - or lack thereof. While there, in one of my workshops, we were led through a breathing exercise centered around Psalm 150. Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Don’t forget to breathe.

The breath of life is expansive. It fills the body, like a balloon. I remember practicing on dummies for CPR training, watching the chest rise with the air from my own lungs. We can see and feel this in our own bodies, too. Try it now. Settle your body wherever you are. Place one hand on your abdomen, and take a deep breath in. Your hand should be pushed out as you breathe in deeply. If anything contracts, you’re doing it wrong. That’s ok, though - most of us do. You can try again.

For most of us, most of the time, our breath tends to be shallow and constricted. This can be an anxious response, which itself increases stress and anxiety. Shallow breathing can also be a subconscious response to societal pressures to make our bodies small. We contract our abdomen muscles, tighten everything up, and in the process, we lose the gift of deep, restorative, oxygenating breath. Unapologetic deep breathing reclaims the goodness of these bodies that God created.

Deep breathing is a form of resistance against the world around us that denigrates so many bodies. Deep breathing invites us to let go of the ways we try to control so many things in life, to receive the free gifts of God’s grace and love. Our deep breaths join with others, with all of creation, and with the Holy Spirit herself, reminding us that we are not alone, that God is with us. Don’t forget to breathe.

This summer our Pentecost theme is a beautiful day in the neighborhood. We’ll be moving out into the neighborhood in different ways, including with our prayers, which will weave together and be carried by the wind! Those who are here will find strips of cloth, on which you can write prayers, and following worship we will use those to begin weaving in a prayer loom outside. Those of you at home are welcome to come here and add your prayers anytime, using your own fabric or what we will have here. All summer, the loom will be available, with strips of cloth and markers, for new prayers to be added. The fibers begin to break down with the elements, joining with creation’s sighs and breath, mingling our prayers together.

We don’t always have the words to pray, but gratefully, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us, with sighs too deep for words. What a relief to know that God hears our prayers, even when we don’t know where to start! If you don’t have words to pray, or if the specific words need to stay in your own heart for right now, you can still join the weaving of prayers, with twine or yarn.

Our reading from Romans opens with the reminder that we are children of God, and that invites us to play! Here at the church house we have balloons, and bubbles, and kites - all playful ways for us to interact with the holy breath-spirit-wind. The Holy Spirit moves us to come, and play, and dance and enjoy the delights of God’s good creation. If you are worshiping from home, I hope you can also find some way to play with the wind today. Blow bubbles, or fly a kite. Make a paper airplane and see where it goes. Breathe deeply and let your body expand with the fullness of God’s love.

There’s nothing like the story of Pentecost to remind us that we don’t control the movement of the Holy Spirit! The rushing wind that sweeps through Jerusalem is the same wind blown into the nostrils of humanity at creation. God’s holy breath, wind, spirit brings new life, and revives, restores, and redeems all of creation. So for heaven’s sake, don’t forget to breathe! Amen.