

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander
Easter 2 (C) ~ April 27, 2025
St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Bethesda
Acts 5:27-32
Psalm 150
John 20:19-31

*God who laid the earth's foundation,
God who spread the heav'ns above,
God who breathes through all creation:
God is Love, eternal Love.*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Sometimes it takes a while to arrive where we are.

Our bodies may have moved, physically, from one space to another, but often our minds – our brains, our spirits – are slower to catch up.

As is my custom, this past week I spent a few days on retreat at a monastery in Massachusetts to recharge a bit after Easter.

I have to say, it was glorious!

And... It took me a while to “arrive.”

I don't mean that my flight was delayed because – miraculously – it was right on time.

I also made all my T connections easily, and I actually turned up at the monastery gate a bit ahead of schedule.

No, when I say that it took me a while to “arrive,” I mean that I was still so charged up from Holy Week and the amazing Easter we shared here at St. Dunstan’s that I needed to take a beat to settle into the holy rhythm of retreat.

I couldn’t just jump in to silence with God when I had been running around in a liturgical frenzy for days and days.

(By the way: If you ever want to explore the possibility of making a retreat of your own, I’m here to help. It can be life-changing.)

I learned all about taking time to “arrive” when I was working as a Chaplain to teenagers, who were expected to shift gears every 40 minutes or so from Algebra to History to English to Chemistry to Spanish to Art to Chapel to lunch to sports. *If* they were lucky, they would have a free period in there somewhere, with an opportunity to hang out with a friend, or use the restroom...or just be. It’s really kind of brutal, if you stop to think about it.

After several years of leading Chapel services that were squeezed in among all my students’ and colleagues’ other obligations, I finally figured out that the best thing I could do for them was to create a bit of space for them to catch up – intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually – with their bodies. To breathe. I wish I could say that I was so wise that I knew intuitively to do this right from the start, but that would not be honest. The truth is that I learned to do this the hard way: It just didn’t work to expect the community – students and adults alike – to move right into worship and contemplation without some transition time. “Come on, everyone, it’s time to be prayerful – NOW!”

Not so much.

Eventually I discovered that sometimes the simplest, most primitive practices are the most meaningful. So I got into the habit of beginning Chapel by asking everyone to put their feet on the floor – to ground themselves, as has become so popular these days – and then to take several slow, deep breaths.

Inhale...exhale...inhale...exhale. After a few cycles I'd add a mantra: Breathe in – *God is* – breathe out – *I am*.

Try it with me?

God is...I am...God is...I am.

I invite you to keep repeating this to yourself so that you might “arrive” here in this place as I continue.

We know that deep, rhythmic breathing is very helpful in managing stress: Physiologically, it improves our oxygen exchange and slows our heart rate and lowers our blood pressure.¹ I encourage you to try it when you are anxious or panicked or can't sleep. But more than that, deep breathing allows us to tap in, spiritually, to the most fundamental of Truths: *God is – We are*.

The breath of God enlivens and in-spires (literally) our very existence. For all of the sophisticated doctrine and dogma of the Church, it comes down to this: *God is – We are*. It's really that simple...and profound.

As Christians, we look to Jesus to demonstrate the nature of God to us. We say that Jesus is the most complete revelation of God – and by listening to His words and following His example, we get a glimpse of the Divine, an insight into the timeless Truth of the universe.

So it's worth paying attention to what Jesus does and says in the Gospels. Take this morning's Gospel, for example: John tells us that it is later in the day on Easter, and the disciples are huddled together behind locked doors out of *fear*. They are stressed and anxious, and with good reason. Their friend, their teacher and their Lord, has just been murdered, brutally, and they could be next. We probably can understand why they are there. But imagine what might happen –

¹ <https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/relaxation-techniques-breath-control-helps-quell-errant-stress-response>

or, more to the point, what might *not* happen – were that fear to keep the disciples imprisoned, locked up, long-term. So Jesus appears among them and says, “Peace.” Be still. Stop moving. Stop agitating. Just be.

And then Jesus *breathes* on them – *emphusao* in Greek – a word that’s used only this one time in the New Testament and is meant to recall God breathing life into the dust of First Man, Adam, at Creation. In this moment when the Risen Christ needs to em-power and en-courage and in-spire this traumatized and paralyzed band of believers, He breathes on them. And He speaks them into new life:

“Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

This is the same Holy Spirit that Jesus was given at His own Baptism, that has activated and empowered His own ministry ever since.

This is a new beginning, a moment of re-creation. If the disciples are very quiet, if they lean in and listen carefully, they might just hear the faint strains of the voice of God saying to Jesus,

“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

As the poet Rose Marie Berger puts it,

“the breathed utterance [passes] through the orator’s flesh to be inhaled by the communal body.”²

If you have ever taken CPR training, you might think about giving those rescue breaths – and watching to see whether or not the chest rises.

Waiting to feel breath exhaled, in return, in sacred rhythm.

² Rose Marie Berger, “The Hungry Spirit: Poetry and baptism anchor our souls,” *Sojourners*, March 2025, 16.

It is such an intimate moment, literally breathing life back into another person, *and* receiving the joyful confirmation of life restored.

Imagine: The Holy Spirit passes through Jesus' own crucified and risen flesh to be inhaled by the frightened disciples.

Imagine: Inhaling Jesus. Inhaling the Holy Spirit. Inhaling God.

God is as near to them as their own next breath.

God is – They are. They are God's own Beloved.

It is the same Holy Spirit that brought new life to Jesus in His resurrection.

This may be heretical (I hope not...), but I'm going to go ahead and say it anyway:

I wonder if the Spirit now bears Jesus' DNA.

Has the Spirit that has moved through Jesus' body been impacted by His genetic footprint?

Does the breath He breathes on the disciples now carry, now convey, now impart some of His own "Jesus-ness" to them?

I wonder.

It is such an intimate moment between Divine and human. Where does one end and the other begin?

This intimate breath-exchange will sustain and enliven the disciples, going forward – even Thomas, who may take a while to arrive but does eventually show up. (I admire that!)

They will move out beyond the walls of fear and anxiety and begin to do the very things for which Jesus has commissioned and equipped them. They will preach. They will teach. They will offer absolution and reconciliation and, in some cases, healing.

Their bodies and lives will be animated by Jesus' own breath – and perhaps by His very DNA.

And the disciples will get it wrong sometimes – often. They will argue. They will disagree with one another and with the powers and principalities that govern the lands in which they live. And they will pay the price for it. They will suffer – and, in some cases, they will die for their convictions. Being beloved by God will not immunize them against suffering, but – *and* – God-willing, it will strengthen and empower them to face it.

God is – They are.

*God is – **We** are.*

Now, I am aware that this theology, this understanding of God, may seem too basic, too primitive, for a sophisticated group such as this. We humans do have a way of complicating things, don't we? We overlay complex systems and hierarchies, rules and regulations, onto what – to Jesus, at least – is pretty simple. God is as near to us as our own next breath, and we can do nothing – NOTHING – apart from God. If we hold on to nothing else from Jesus's life and death and resurrection and teaching and preaching and healing than this, then we will be doing well.

The deep spiritual Truth that Jesus reveals is that we are, in fact, never alone. God exhales, we inhale. God creates, and then re-creates – with our help. Jesus offers us the same Spirit that activated and empowered His own earthly ministry. It is all around us – as near to us as our next breath – but sometimes – many times – we cannot perceive it.

In a moment, we as a community of faith will welcome sweet little Wyatt Martin into the Body of Christ through Baptism. Today he will receive his “Certificate of Belonging” – and by that I don’t just mean the piece of paper that documents the sacrament administered on this day.

To return again to the poet Rose Marie Berger,

“We all need a ‘certificate of belonging.’ Not only in our family, friend groups, and ‘tribe,’ but in the world to come, in a chain of ancestors and descendants reaching through us.”

That is precisely what happens in Baptism.

Even though he most likely will not remember this day in years to come, today Wyatt – and we – will be reminded that he is God’s Beloved. As are we. Wyatt will be marked as Christ’s own forever – *forever* – and nothing that the world can throw at him for the rest of his life will ever change that. Not sickness or sin or other suffering. Not distraction or disaffection or busy-ness, nor doubt nor fear, nor anxiety. Not politics. Nothing. Sadly, being beloved by God will not immunize Wyatt against suffering, but – *and* – God-willing, it will strengthen and empower him to face it.

God is – We are.

That is our Certificate of Belonging.

It’s as simple – and as profound – as that.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.