

Ruah

Psalm 104:24-34

May 19, 2013

I want you to hold your breath. Now let it out.

Now, I want you to hold your breath. Just hold it. I want you to raise your hand and keep it raised as long as you are still holding your breath!

So, tell me, can you hold your breath?

No, you can't! You can't hold your breath. You can only take it, take a breath, take it as it is given, one breath at a time, every breath a gift of new life.

Every breath is a gift of new life. The Hebrew word for breath is *ruah*. Say it: "*ruah*." *Ruah* means breath. And *ruah* also means wind. And *ruah* also means spirit.

In the beginning, *ruah elohim*, the Spirit of God, moved over the face of the deep. In the beginning, *ruah elohim*, the wind of God, blew over the surface of the raging ocean. In the beginning, *ruah elohim*, the breath of God, breathed into the lifeless chaos and brought galaxies and atoms and earth and heavens and oceans and sky and plants and animals, and you, into existence!

Ruah elohim, the Spirit of God, is the animating force of the universe. Without God's Spirit, without God's wind, without God's breath, there is no life.

And *ruah elohim*, the Spirit of God, is the binding force of the universe, of every particle and every being in it, holding it together, sustaining its life. "When you take away your breath, Lord," the psalmist wrote, "they die and go back to the dust from which they came. But when you give them breath, they are created; you give new life to the earth!"

You can't hold breath. You can't hold *ruah*. You can only take it, take it as it is given, one breath at a time, every breath a gift of new life.

How does that make you feel?

It makes me feel extraordinarily vulnerable, extraordinarily fragile, extraordinarily humble. Life is fragile. Our lives are short at best, no more really than the brief bloom of an apple blossom, and just as fragile. I can't hold my breath. I can't sustain or indefinitely extend my own life. I can only take it, as a gift, to be appreciated, to be used, to be enjoyed, for as long as I have it.

Our lives are fleeting and small, but wondrous, truly wondrous! Right now, at this moment, I have breath. *Ruah elohim*, the breath of God, is animating my body and my spirit, and that makes me extraordinarily grateful.

I will sing to the Lord all my life, as long as I live I will sing.

Of course, I will sing! Because each moment, each breath, each new experience is a gift from God. When I have no breath, when I am dead, I cannot sing, so as long as I live, as long as I have breath, as long as I am privileged to live and move and be in this world of God's making, aware of its beauty and its wonder, and aware of God's wonder and God's beauty and God's glory, I will sing!

Ruah elohim, the Spirit of God, is the animating force of the universe, and of me. And *ruah elohim*, the Spirit of God, is the animating force of the church, and of us.

In the beginning, *ruah elohim*, the Spirit of God, moved over the gathered believers. In the beginning, *ruah elohim*, the wind of God, blew through the house where they were sitting. In the beginning, *ruah elohim*, the breath of God, breathed into them, breathed the breath of God into them all, women and children and men, enlivening them, empowering them, gifting them, propelling them, bringing a church, the church of Christ Jesus, into existence!

Without God's Spirit, without God's wind, without God's breath, there is no church. And *ruah elohim*, the Spirit of God, is the binding force of the church. It is God's Spirit that holds us together and sustains our life. When the Spirit, God's breath, is absent, we die, we are useless, we are less than nothing. But when God gives us breath, we come alive! The Spirit of God gives new life to the church!

But listen very carefully: we can't hold our breath. We can't hold God's Spirit. We can't contain it or constrain it or tell it where to rest or where to lead us. The wind of God's Spirit blows wherever it wishes! We can only take it, take it as it is given, one breath at a time, every breath a gift of new life.

How does that make you feel?

It makes me feel extraordinarily grateful. I am grateful for the church, for the church is all its scattered and diverse forms, frail and fallible, sometimes wandering, sometimes lost, sometimes missing the point, except that its existence itself is the point. Because it is God's breath and God's breath alone that makes the church, that brings us together and holds us together, that shows the world the face of Christ in our faces, that speaks to the world the

word of Christ through our words, that brings to the world the healing power of Christ through our bodies.

And I am grateful for this church, for our church here in Waterloo, Iowa, frail and fallible, too, sometimes wandering and sometimes lost, sometimes missing the point. But we are because of God's Spirit. We live and move and have our being here in this community because of God's Spirit. This church is an extraordinary gift of God to each one of us, and, I pray, it may too be a gift to the world.

I am grateful, and I am humble. What do we have, that really matters, that we can take credit for? What are we, as a church of Jesus Christ, that we have made for ourselves? It is all gift! It is all a gift! If we have or if we are anything that matters, it is only because God's Spirit has breathed life into us! And we cannot hold on to God's breath. We can only take it, take it as it is given, one breath at a time, every breath a gift of new life.

Where will I be, where will you be, where will this church be, in two years, five years, fifty years? Only God knows! But today, God's breath is being breathed into us and among us, and it is our job to breath deeply and to let God's Spirit animate our body.

Does the Spirit say, "sing?" Then we should sing!

Does the Spirit say, "laugh?" Then we should laugh!

Does the Spirit say, "dance?" Then we should dance!

But we don't dance in this church. We are too dignified, too proud, to dance in public in a solemn setting such as this.

But who says it must be solemn? We can't hold our breath! We can't constrain the Spirit! We don't know where God will blow us! We can only gratefully take each new breath that God gives us, as it comes, and that, by itself, is an extraordinary blessing, an extraordinary delight, more than enough to sing about, more than enough to laugh about, more than enough to dance about!

May our lives be filled always with joy and praise, because we know that every breath we take comes as God's gift. And may our life as a church be filled always with joy and praise because we know that all we are and all we are privileged to share and to do comes as God's gift.