

Pentecost

May 31, 2020

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The Holy Spirit has been imagined from time immemorial as the breath of God. That breath by which God spoke the word of creation in the beginning. That breath which God breathed into the wet clay to bring to life the first human being. That breath which breathed new life into the valley of dead bones over which Ezekiel prophesies at the Easter Vigil. That breath which the Risen Jesus breathes over the disciples in today's reading at Pentecost.

In the Upanishads breath is the sacred essence of all things. It's the life of life. It's the very ground of our soul. It's the first thing we do as are born, breathe in, and it's the last thing we do as we die, breathe out. The deep, resonant OM is the ultimate expression of our being, the ultimate manifestation of be-ing of Being, Brahman.

However, in these days of the coronavirus, our breath can be demonic. We must wear masks to protect ourselves from another's breath and to protect others from ours. But its stifling. It can feel suffocating, feeling the heat of one's own breath not able to be expelled effortlessly, speedily into the wind. When I want to illustrate to my students that our awareness has both a foreground focus of attention against a tacit background, I ask them if they are breathing right now. It's not like they have to think about it. But it's not the object of their attention before I ask the question. Today though, it's hard not to be aware of our breath. It's hard to put it out of the foreground of our consciousness.

I talk about this foreground/background structure to awareness to draw an analogy to the presence of God in our lives. Like our breath, God is always present, but usually he is in the background of our awareness. Indeed, God is the background against which everything exists, he is that ongoing ever-creative activity by which all things live and move and have their own being.

Our masks bring our breath from the background to the foreground of our awareness. Our gathering together today, in person for the first time in months, brings the presence of God from the background to the foreground of our awareness as well.

And today more than ever, we need that breath of God to breathe new life into our own souls. In a world turned upside down, that can leave us all a little breathless, we need the breath of God to breathe new energy into our stressed, and weary spirits. I don't think it's a coincidence that death of an African-American in police custody that was the straw that broke the back of American patience has occurred ten weeks into the coronavirus lockdown. At a time that has knocked the breath out of us, we need the breath of God to blow over our embers, to invigorate within us the flame of life.

Before the days of coronavirus masks, mystics, both East and West, would teach their students how to meditate by first teaching them how to breathe. Breathing mindfully, deliberately, deeply and slow our racing thoughts, still our anxious hearts. For in the hustle and bustle of our daily life, our breathing, even when masks force it into our awareness, perhaps especially when a mask forces it into our awareness, our breathing can become shallow. We can find ourselves holding our breath for fear of what's to come next. God invites us to catch our breath by becoming mindful of what lies all about us, in the background of the here and now that his breath is forever bringing forth into existence around about us and within us. One of the great medieval women mystics, Hildegard of Bingen, speaks of her soul as a feather on the breath of God. There is an image for our time.

So, as we continue our prayer, may we take the time to breathe. May we breathe in the breath of God, feel its energy empowering us, sustaining us, renewing us, transforming us. May we clear a space in our lives to feel the Spirit of God blowing over us like a mother soothing a crying child. May we attend to the Spirit of God within us and without us, ambient all about us.