

Breathe: 4. Restore
Psalm 23
July 30, 2017
Pastor Steve Richards

If this is your first time here or you've been away the past few Sundays, we are in middle of a series called "Breathe." We all need room to breathe, and if you don't have room in your life to breathe, you know it and the people around you know it. I wish I had a picture of my college roommate's space. This was the best I could find on the Internet (photo). We were best friends but we had a clear separation in our room between his space and my space – and his looked like this. Just when I thought he could not put anything else in our room he would find a way. Just one more thing, and if you could push hard enough and long enough, you might even be able to close the closet door. Or maybe you have a cabinet like that – or a garage like that – remember when you could fit your car in the garage? And for too many of us, we live our lives at the limit – financially, emotionally, our schedules – and consequently, we have no room to breathe. But life is better when we can (breathe).

This morning, I want to talk about how we can put our relationships at risk. In our effort to get the most out of life, we squeeze one thing more and one thing more and one thing more and eventually as we are squeezing the last thing in, life falls apart. Some of you experienced that in a relationship. You called home and said, "I'll running late, something came up at the last minute and I'll miss dinner or miss the dance recital or the baseball game or you'll have to start the party without me – and instead of understanding, what you got was your husband or your wife or your significant other hung up on you. It was the last straw! In your effort to cram one more thing in – eventually there was a meltdown. And some of you are on the verge of this in your marriage. Some of you are on the verge of this with your kids. Some of you are on the verge of this in a critical relationship. And some of you have already been there and you promised you would never again end up there. "I won't allow there to be such little space that there is no room, no margin, because I don't want to lose another relationship." And yet, here you are. Relationships thrive when there is room to breathe, and relationships die when we live at our limit.

I want to tell you my own story that took me close to the edge - and what I learned from this. It happened almost 27 years ago, and I wish I could say that what I learned has meant I've never struggled with this since – but I still get into trouble. I'm still learning. God has not given up on me yet, but this story was the starting point. 27 years ago, I was recruited to join a church staff and given the goal of creating "a ministry with children and youth that was second to none." And I was excited. This was what I'd dreamed of doing, and the church promised the resources to make it happen, and I jumped in head first. I was in my early 30s and I was ready to pour everything I could into this work. I was having the time of my life. I was making sacrifices and not spending much time at home or with our two daughters who were in elementary school, but I told myself – this was the Lord's work and if other parts of my life suffered, so be it – I'm serving God. What could be better than that! And the church was growing and the number of kids were increasing. Every summer, we would ramp up our programming, trying to outdo whatever we offered the previous summer, until one summer I remember being away from home for nine weeks (a mission trip, overnight camps and day camps, a leadership experience that took me to Vermont for a week, and then an opportunity to teach at a mission school, and it was all capped off with a trip to the Boundary Waters). I was gone so much that the office staff put a note in each Sunday's bulletin that asked the question "Where in the world is Pastor Steve this week?" And I was happy, and the church was happy, but the people I lived with – not so much. In fact, I look back on that summer and others like it and I'm amazed my family was still there at the end

of summer – I would not have known if they had left. Even when I was home, I was preoccupied by my next trip. And when Amanda would ask about my schedule, I'd say it was just for the summer or just for a season, but it wasn't. And then one day, someone took me aside and said, "Steve, the church is a lousy marriage partner." That comment struck my heart.

It's like this rock. The rock is my responsibility, mine to carry – and there are times when we have to hand that responsibility to our spouse or our partner and we say, "I've got to go to work and I've got all these things and I'll be away from home more than I ought to be, and I need you to carry this for me. It belongs to me, but while you are doing everything you normally do, hold this for me while I do something else somewhere else." And they always accept it, because that's being a good husband or wife or children. They know dad or mom is working hard and so they carry it. But the problem is when we leave them with the load and we never come and take it back and time goes by...And it gets to a point where there's no room to breathe – and exhaustion sets in and you drop the rock. And sometimes, that's the end of the relationship, or if it's not, it can take months, maybe years, to restore trust – if it ever is restored. Maybe you've never been to this place or maybe that day will come or maybe you can take my experience and translate it to whatever you are facing. Because I wish I had learned about this a whole lot sooner. There's a word that I had to learn. The word is submission. The dictionary defines it as **"the act of accepting or yielding to a superior force or to the will or authority of another..."** And to do that means you have to relinquish control.

And that brings us to Psalm 23. It's a psalm that is read frequently at funerals and as a result, we tend to think it is about the end of life and the promise of eternal life, but it's really a psalm about living – finding the way to live fully and completely – having room to breathe. The psalm begins: **The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.** In the ancient world, kings were the shepherds of the people, and it was the responsibility of kings to provide for and protect the people, but they often failed to do so. But the writer of the psalm is saying God never fails. God is the shepherd who will never fail. Not many of us know a shepherd or what a shepherd does or the relationship between a shepherd and sheep, so I decided to meet one. Tim Reese is the shepherd or caretaker at Gale Woods Farm which is part of the Three Rivers Park District. Recently, we went out to talk to him, and here's what he told me about sheep: [video interview about sheep]

For a sheep to "lie down in green pastures" means they have food, to be led "beside still waters" means they have something to drink, to be led "in right paths" means danger is avoided and shelter provided. The shepherd keeps the sheep alive, and the sheep cannot do that on their own. Tim told me that many years ago they left the sheep in the pasture overnight and did not send the guard dogs (shepherds) that night. It was the only night that ever happened because the next morning, 8-10 sheep had been killed by coyotes. To say the Lord is my shepherd, to say he restores my soul is saying God literally saves my life. So what's the relationship between sheep and the shepherd? [video interview about shepherds] The shepherd provides for the sheep what the sheep cannot provide for themselves. On their own they get in trouble. They struggle to meet their basic needs. They cannot thrive. The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. (breathe in; breathe out)

We can try to be our own shepherd, and most of us try. We see it, we want it, we want to make it happen. If we can't afford it, finance it. If we don't have time, just cram it in. If we don't have time for family, so be it – after all, I'm doing it for them! Many years ago, I listened to a pastor's retirement message. He described a point early in his ministry (a point much like the one I faced all those years ago). He was passionate about his work and what he could accomplish and most evening, he was away from home for a meeting or an appointment with someone – and often

his wife was with him, so they would arrange for a babysitter. And this was the pattern week after week until one evening as he prepared to leave the house one of his children said, "Daddy, can you be our babysitter tonight?" And suddenly, he realized he had allowed his work to take over his life. He had submitted to his work. And I was there. I remember Amanda telling me if I didn't work on having a relationship with my children, one day I would have no relationship with them. It's why I need a shepherd. The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. (breathe) I need a shepherd. I need the shepherd to be what drives me.

In the first part of this series, I suggested that every one of us has a driver – something that drives us – and for most of us, it is fear. What if I don't do it? What if I don't measure up? None of us wants to live without room to breathe but what drives the breath out of us is fear. And for me, I had attached my worth to what I was producing. I wanted to be first in, last out, and work seven days a week if necessary. And I'd forgotten how to breathe. I was not letting the shepherd "shepherd" me. I only have a couple unique roles in my life: first husband to Amanda and father to my two children. Everything else someone else can do and will do. Someone else will ultimately do everything else in my life, but there are two roles only I can do. Why would I trade what is unique for something someone else can do and will do. I've talked to too many people who have regrets. Only get our 20s, our 30s, our 40s, 50s 60s once – which means our kids and our grandkids are only where they are once – no do-overs.

Don't trade. Let the Lord be your shepherd. Create the room to breathe. The Lord can restore your life. Don't you wonder what God could do if we let God be God. There is a command that we hear over and over again in the Bible (the most frequently heard command): Do not fear. What if I said no to an opportunity? What if I said no to whatever is driving me, so that I could submit to what God has created me to do.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. Take the card with you that you received this morning. Put it where you will see it several times a day. Breathe. Just Breathe. The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. Let God do what only God can do.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of July 30, 2017

Weekly Prayer: Most gracious and loving God, we know that you are our shepherd. Sometimes that knowledge comforts us. But too often we are still afraid. Help us to believe that your goodness and mercy are with us all the days of our lives - in everything we say and do. Amen.

Monday, July 31

Scripture: Psalm 131

LORD, my heart isn't proud; my eyes aren't conceited. I don't get involved with things too great or wonderful for me. No. But I have calmed and quieted myself like a weaned child on its mother; I'm like the weaned child that is with me. Israel, wait for the LORD— from now until forever from now!

Observation: This week, we will read and reflect on psalms about resting. The first "resting psalm" we'll consider is a short little gem, Psalm 131. It contains only three verses. It is attributed to David and was included by the editor of Psalms as one of the psalms termed "a song of ascents," traditionally sung by pilgrims going up to Jerusalem for a feast. It begins with an attitude of humility. We can't rest when we feel we have to be in control. We can't relax when we have to feel like we're in charge.

Application: According to Psalm 131, just *how* does David quiet his inner person before the Lord? What are the elements mentioned in this psalm? When with the Apostle Paul we can say, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances" (Philippians 4:12), we have moved to a place of trust.

Prayer: Lord, you are the author of all that is. You have been before me and will be even when I am no longer in this world. Everything belongs to you. Help me to seek your guidance in all that I face. Amen.

Tuesday, August 1

Scripture: Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd. I lack nothing. He lets me rest in grassy meadows; he leads me to restful waters; he keeps me alive. He guides me in proper paths for the sake of his good name. Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no danger because you are with me. Your rod and your staff— they protect me. You set a table for me right in front of my enemies. You bathe my head in oil; my cup is so full it spills over! Yes, goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the LORD's house as long as I live.

Observation: The psalm is attributed to David, probably a reflection that drew on his years as a shepherd for his father's flock. A shepherd was expected to: Lead the sheep to watering holes and fresh green pasture when they had eaten off the grass in one place; Protect the sheep from dangers such as wolves, lions, and bears; Heal the sheep when they were injured and help during birthing; Rescue the lost sheep. If a sheep wandered off, the shepherd would look for it until he found it.

Application: The basic premise is that since Yahweh is my shepherd, then I shall never be in need for anything. In times of doubt and trouble, this psalm reminds us of God's faithfulness, which calls us into a deeper and more trusting relationship with the Lord, our shepherd. In what ways do you need a shepherd?

Prayer: My Lord and my shepherd, help me to trust that you always have my best interests in mind, even when it is not what I want. May I always turn to you for comfort and rest. As I wait, restore my soul. Amen.

Wednesday, August 2

Scripture: Psalm 16

Protect me, God, because I take refuge in you. I say to the LORD, "You are my Lord. Apart from you, I have nothing good." Now as for the "holy ones" in the land, the "magnificent ones" that I was so happy about; let their suffering increase because they hurried after a different god. I won't participate in their blood offerings; I won't let their names cross my lips. You, LORD, are my portion, my cup; you control my destiny. The property lines have fallen beautifully for me; yes, I have a lovely home. I will bless the LORD who advises me; even at night I am instructed in the depths of my mind. I always put the LORD in front of me; I will not stumble because he is on my right side. That's why my heart celebrates and my mood is joyous; yes, my whole body will rest in safety because you won't abandon my life to the grave; you won't let your faithful follower see the pit. You teach me the way of life. In your presence is total celebration. Beautiful things are always in your right hand.

Observation: Psalm 16 considers the rest we look forward to, even in death. The psalm begins with a general plea for safety: "Protect me, God, because I take refuge in you." (16:1) But the psalm concludes with a remarkable insight for the writer, one of life after the grave. Verse 10 is quoted as a prophecy of the Messiah ("your Holy One") in Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:24-28) and Paul's sermon in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:35).

Application: How do you rest in the Lord at *your* deathbed or the bedside of one you love? With this confidence that death is not the end -- resurrection is! Look at his expectation of eternal life in verse 11: Celebration in God's presence and beautiful pleasures at his right hand!

Prayer: Grant me, gracious God, the confidence that I need to hold fast to the hope of your eternal care. Conquer any fear that I have about tomorrow, and help me to commend my life and those close to me to your ultimate care each day. Amen.

Thursday, August 3

Scripture: Psalm 3

LORD, I have so many enemies! So many are standing against me. So many are talking about me: "Even God won't help him." Selah. But you, LORD, are my shield! You are my glory! You are the one who restores me. I cry out loud to the LORD, and he answers me from his holy mountain. Selah. I lie down, sleep, and wake up because the LORD helps me. I won't be afraid of thousands of people surrounding me on all sides. Stand up, LORD! Save me, my God! In fact, hit all my enemies on the jaw; shatter the teeth of the wicked! Rescue comes from the LORD! May your blessing be on your people! Selah

Observation: The editor of Psalms attributes Psalm 3 to David, at a time "when he fled from his son Absalom" (2 Samuel 15-18). Even in flight for his life he senses the protection of God and is able to rest. Some scholars suggest that rather than a psalm by David, it was intended to encourage the reader to imagine a situation like that of David – his family in turmoil.

Application: This psalm demonstrates that to prosper and be content does not mean to live without struggle or opposition. It is unlikely that you will face a situation with "thousands of people surrounding me on all sides." How can you find the room you need to breathe even in the midst of fears?

Prayer: Lord, search me and know my ways. See if there is anything within me that needs correction and care. Strengthen me for any challenges before me. As I consider the relationships that I hold dear, help me to be a source of healing and hope. Amen.

Friday, August 4

Scripture: Psalm 1

The truly happy person doesn't follow wicked advice, doesn't stand on the road of sinners, and doesn't sit with the disrespectful. Instead of doing those things, these persons love the LORD's Instruction, and they recite God's Instruction day and night! They are like a tree replanted by streams of water, which bears fruit at just the right time and whose leaves don't fade. Whatever they do succeeds. That's not true for the wicked! They are like dust that the wind blows away. And that's why the wicked will have no standing in the court of justice— neither will sinners in the assembly of the righteous. The LORD is intimately acquainted with the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked is destroyed.

Observation: The book of Psalms begins with a beatitude: “blessed” or “happy.” As the introduction to the book, all of the psalms will involve a portrayal of what it means to be happy or blessed. There are two ways of living presented in these verses. Which way will you choose?

Application: Happiness tends to be understood essentially as enjoying oneself – self-fulfillment. But for Psalm 1, happiness involves not enjoying oneself but delight in the teaching of God. The goal of life is to be found not in self-fulfillment but in praising God. This psalm invites us to orientate our lives. Why would it be necessary to have an aim?

Prayer: Loving God, you have given me life and the freedom to choose the way that I will travel through life. Help me to be purposeful in the way that I choose to live this day. May I honor you in all that I say and do. Amen.

Saturday, August 5

Scripture: Psalm 91

Living in the Most High's shelter, camping in the Almighty's shade, I say to the LORD, "You are my refuge, my stronghold! You are my God—the one I trust!" God will save you from the hunter's trap and from deadly sickness. God will protect you with his pinions; you'll find refuge under his wings. His faithfulness is a protective shield. Don't be afraid of terrors at night, arrows that fly in daylight, or sickness that prowls in the dark, destruction that ravages at noontime. Even if one thousand people fall dead next to you, ten thousand right beside you— it won't happen to you. Just look with your eyes, and you will see the wicked punished. Because you've made the LORD my refuge, the Most High, your place of residence— no evil will happen to you; no disease will come close to your tent. Because he will order his messengers to help you, to protect you wherever you go. They will carry you with their own hands so you don't bruise your foot on a stone. You'll march on top of lions and vipers; you'll trample young lions and serpents underfoot. God says, "Because you are devoted to me, I'll rescue you. I'll protect you because you know my name. Whenever you cry out to me, I'll answer. I'll be with you in troubling times. I'll save you and glorify you. I'll fill you full with old age. I'll show you my salvation."

Observation: This is a psalm of confidence or trust. Some scholars suggest that the psalm comes from a person who had sought refuge in the Temple from persecutors. Others suggest that the writer offered thankful testimony after recovery from a serious illness. The imagery is open-ended enough to be relevant and powerful in many situations, as a source of encouragement and strength for the people of God.

Application: The psalm proclaims that no place, no time, no circumstance that befalls us is beyond God's ability to protect us. God's care is unconditional and absolute. Can you rest secure in such a promise? Can you trust the witness through the ages that God is?

Prayer: Most gracious and loving God, we know that you are our shepherd. Sometimes that knowledge comforts us. But too often we are still afraid. Help us to believe that your goodness and mercy are with us all the days of our lives - in everything we say and do. Amen.