

Breathe: 1. Resting
Psalm 46; Mark 1:35
July 9, 2017
Pastor Steve Richards

Breathe. Just Breathe. Isn't this what we long for in a Minnesota summer? Last week as I was listening to the radio, I heard that some group rated Minnesota as the second best state to spend a summer. Breathe. Just breathe.

When I was growing up, our family took a month long camping trip every August. What I realize now is that Dad needed a break. It was his chance to get away from people and the daily demands of ministry and come up for air. But I didn't see it that way. I thought more about all the things I would miss out on while we were out of town. Our family had a pop-up trailer, and all six of us would sleep in it. Our parents had one bed. My two youngest sisters shared the other bed, and then my third sister and I had sleeping bags on the floor. That we survived and grew up to fairly well adjusted adults after living that close together for a month every year is rather amazing. We didn't have much money, so we would camp at the cheapest places – often with no facilities. There might be a pit toilet, sometimes no water – which meant going into town to fill water jugs. And during the day, we would hang out. That was it. We might go swimming in the afternoon or explore the campground, but mostly we were expected to read books. Every camping trip was preceded by a trip to the public library where each of us checked out a pile of books. Problem was - I didn't read very well, and I didn't enjoy reading which made these excruciating days for me. What I wanted was to do things. Everyone else was focused on reading but not me. For me, every day I wanted something to happen: "come on, come on, we're wasting time, let's do something." To be still. To just hang out. I didn't know how to do that. To be honest, I still struggle with that. For me, a good day is a full day, and if it's not a full day, something must be wrong. Even now, I like having several projects open at the same time, not because I can multi-task – I can't – but if several projects are going at once, I know there is always something.

But there's a problem, when we live like that our calendar can get like this (overfilled monthly calendar). You never run out of stuff to do. It's like a perpetual multiple choice! If some of us had a calendar that looked like this (monthly calendar with blank days), it would scare us. We would not know what to do with this. (Note some days are completely blank. What's that about?) But the truth is, it is not okay to look like this (overfilled calendar). Where there is no space, no room to breathe; where we are so busy – so much crammed into your life that you get to the point where you don't ever enjoy the stuff you do; always in a hurry. And maybe you got to this point, not because you ever wanted this, but it just happened, it just got this way. Or sometimes, we end up here and we tell ourselves, this is just a season – when the kids get older or when I finished that project – or when we retire. Or we tell ourselves, everybody else is doing the same thing. This is just the way it is. But when our lives reach a point where there is no room for anything else, it's a problem.

This morning, we begin a series in which we will learn how to breathe again! And to do that, we will be turning to the book of Psalms, not to read or to study the whole book, but to read a variety of psalms so that we can hear what the authors were saying about their lives. The psalms give voice to a wide range of human emotions that arise from everyday experience. Jesus, himself, turned to the psalms to give voice to a range of emotions that he experienced. There is an honesty in these words that still resonates today. They come to us from people who desired to walk in God's way. And when we read them – take the time to really read and reflect on the words, we will hear God speak. But we need room for that to happen.

At the end of the day, life is better when there is space to breathe. When you can breathe, you don't have to drive 80 mph to get to places. You can talk to people. You have time. You enjoy what you are doing. You can be present in the moment because you are not distracted by all the other stuff swirling around. You can come to church or listen online and be able to focus. You are able to pray and focus on what God wants you to hear because you are not distracted by everything else jammed into your life. Life is better, when we breathe.

When you can't breathe – when there's no room to breathe – your stress level goes up. Have you ever been in the car, you are running late and suddenly you are stuck in traffic, you are not moving but the clock is and what happens to your stress? Hopefully no one else is in the car with you because listening to you or watching you, their stress goes up too! It's like this (walk to edge of stage). I get so close to the edge that you can't focus on anything else. The adrenalin kicks in and forces us to focus but we can't live on adrenalin. Why do we live this way? Maybe you have a demanding job or you have lots of responsibilities, or you're in a season of life where there's a lot happening. Or for some, it's a lack of discipline. But I think, if we look deep enough, there's a driver behind this – and that driver is fear. If I cut back, I'm afraid that... If I didn't do that, I'm afraid that... If I didn't let my kids do that, I'm afraid that... If I told my daughter she could do swimming and gymnastics but not dance, volleyball, and soccer, I'm afraid that... I'm afraid, and none of us want to be afraid. Fear drives us. It's a fear of missing out or our kids missing out. It's a fear of falling behind – we live in a competitive environment – where we live, what school our kids attend, how we spend our time – we've got to keep up. And maybe you are not afraid but you are married to someone who is, and they are pushing you. Or it's a fear of not mattering. We want our lives to count for something. And we end up equating busyness and spending and accumulating with how much we matter. Our fears can pull us away from what matters most.

There are aspects to life where there are no do-overs. You flunk a test, you can take it over again. You fail at marriage, you can try again with a second marriage. But once your 20s are gone, they are gone. Once your 30s are gone, they are gone. We can't redo our 40s or 50s or 60s. We get just one cycle of life, and if we're not doing well, we get to the end and what we have is regret. I've had these conversations. Some of you in your 70s, 80s or 90s could tell the rest of us if you could back, you would have created more space – more breathing room.

So what if we addressed our fears and what drives us and we look for space to breathe? In the Bible, God speaks to this. This is a faith issues. Will I let God or how far will I let God into my life? Or here's another way to look at this: God has a reserve that you could tap into, so how do you tap into that? It's learning how to breathe.

In the sixth chapter of Mark, the disciples of Jesus return from a successful mission and tell him all they have done and taught. When they left, all they had was a staff – a walking stick – no food, no money no bag to carry things. They were expected to trust that God would supply their needs. They had been watching Jesus and how he healed the sick, taught in parables and changed people's lives and they were ready to do this. They left with nothing but enthusiasm, not knowing how it might go and when they returned to Jesus they were full of stories to tell Jesus – and probably full of themselves, too. They were eager to share what had happened. Mark tells us they had so much to say that they don't have time to stop and eat. So, Jesus stops them and says: **“Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.”** (Mark 6:31) Jesus knows his followers cannot sustain themselves. He shows them a vital rhythm for life. It's a rhythm they have seen him practice. **Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to solitary place, where he prayed.** (Mark

1:35) If anyone had a lot to do, it was Jesus. His mission statement was save the world, and he knew he could not do what he was sent to do unless he learned how to breathe.

Those who have been to one of our Discover Messiah lunches or a Coffee with the Pastor have heard me say that this hour together in worship is the most important hour of the week. I say that not because I want more people to listen to me or more of our seats to be filled, but from my own experience I've learned that I need space at the start of my week to listen for God's direction. It's too easy to stay busy and never fulfill my purpose in life. Have you ever been so busy that you felt like you never accomplished anything? This hour in worship is about listening and hearing a plan for the week. It's about breathing and tapping into the reserve that God has made available. But one hour a week is not enough. We must create space every day. It has to be intentional. If we just wait until we have the time, we will never receive more time than we have today. There's never going to be more than 24 hours in a day.

That brings us to Psalm 46. The author hears the voice of God calling out in the midst of life's struggles and challenges. Be still and know that I am God. It's not "know that I am God, so be still." Rather "Be still." There will be storms in life when things happen that are beyond our control and we are tempted to react with fear, but God's invitation is "Be still" When life is at its worst, we do not have and will never have the whole picture, but God does – and we can know God – we can tap into God's ready reserve. All it takes is to be still. It's not as easy as it seems. It's often my busyness that I carry with me into the stillness – this long list of to dos and people who are on my heart – and I can get so busy talking to God that I forget to be still. To be still, to rest is God's gift. And it's in the rest. It's in the stillness that we know God.

When I was in college, I took voice lessons. I was a vocal music major, and one of the requirements to be in the choir was a weekly voice lesson. So every week I would spend a half hour with Burr McWilliams. I wanted a voice like his voice – even his name gave you a sense of his voice – Burr. And I tried. I came for my lesson. I rehearsed during the week. But I just didn't have that voice. And then one day at my lesson, Burr told me to lay down on the floor. And the rest of my voice lesson, I was singing from flat on my back. An amazing thing happened, I found my voice. It was all about breathing properly, and when you're flat on your back, you breathe the way you were made to breathe. 20 years I'd been breathing, but not in the way God made me to breathe. And when I could breathe, I found my voice.

So, let me suggest an exercise – a spiritual exercise for the week ahead. First, you may need to schedule this. You need room to breathe. It's not going to work to do this while you are driving the car or anything else. This is your time to breathe. Put your feet on the floor and begin relaxing, focus on your feet and gradually moving up your legs, your torso, your neck and your head, relaxing each area. If there is tension anywhere, go back and relax. And breathe. Then begin repeating this phrase: Be still and know that I am God. It is helpful to speak the words aloud if you are in a place where you can do that. Then repeat that phrase leaving off a word each time:

Be still and know that I am God.

Be still and know that I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be.

It's learning how to breathe. How to let God give you what you need. Breathe. Just Breathe.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of July 9, 2017

Weekly Prayer: God, send your Holy Spirit here into this space. Like a gentle summer breeze, let your Spirit touch me and heal my brokenness, and lift me out of despair and doubt. Dry the tears of pain and sorrow. Comfort and nourish me with the many blessings of your great love. O God, let me flourish and blossom in the presence of your healing love and grace. Amen.

Monday, July 10

Scripture: Psalm 46

God is our strong refuge;
he is truly our helper in times of trouble.
For this reason we do not fear when the earth shakes,
and the mountains tumble into the depths of the sea,
when its waves crash and foam,
and the mountains shake before the surging sea. (Selah)
The river's channels bring joy to the city of God,
the special, holy dwelling place of the sovereign One.
God lives within it, it cannot be moved.
God rescues it at the break of dawn.
Nations are in uproar, kingdoms are overthrown.
God gives a shout, the earth dissolves.
The LORD who commands armies is on our side!
The God of Jacob is our protector! (Selah)
Come! Witness the exploits of the LORD,
who brings devastation to the earth!
He brings an end to wars throughout the earth;
he shatters the bow and breaks the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.
He says, "Stop your striving and recognize that I am God!
I will be exalted over the nations! I will be exalted over the earth!"
The LORD who commands armies is on our side!
The God of Jacob is our protector! (Selah)

Observation: This is a hymn of affirmation. The author begins with a reminder that God is our refuge and strength in times that bring terror to people. When life is at its worst, we do not have and never will have the whole picture, but we can know God. In Jerusalem, where "a river" of life and health flows from the temple, all is quietness and security. The author hears the voice of God calling out in the midst of life's struggles.

Application: Take some time to be still, and ask the Spirit of God to show you where you are. Maybe today feels like a mountaintop time, or concern for a friend or family member is uppermost in your mind. Maybe some situation of injustice disturbs you, or you are frustrated and angry. Be still. Breathe in. Breathe out. Be still.

Prayer: O God, you are my refuge and strength, a help always near. Listen to the cries of my heart. Help me to slow down, to be still, and to know you – and you alone – are God. Amen.

Tuesday, July 11

Scripture: Psalm 131

O LORD, my heart is not proud,
nor do I have a haughty look.
I do not have great aspirations,
or concern myself with things that are beyond me.
Indeed I am composed and quiet,
like a young child carried by its mother;
I am content like the young child I carry.
O Israel, hope in the LORD
now and forevermore!

Observation: The author of this psalm is almost certainly a woman. Some scholars suggest this psalm may have originally been spoken by a woman as she carried her young child along the way to Jerusalem, perhaps even up the steps toward the Temple. Verse 2 pictures the experience of mother and child. God is like a mother who even when feeling the pain of her children, even when overcome by fatigue, still welcomes her children into her arms and carries them along a difficult way.

Application: When have you felt the calm and comfort of being held – even if you must recall a childhood experience? How have you been able to offer such comfort and reassurance to another person? Such moments invite us to be calm and quiet and wait.

Prayer: Lord God, I need you. That I need you is not an indication of my weakness, but your strength. Keep me humble and aware that life is better when I sense your love for me. Help me to be still, and to know you are God. Amen.

Wednesday, July 12

Scripture: Psalm 116

I love the LORD
because he heard my plea for mercy,
and listened to me.
As long as I live, I will call to him when I need help.
The ropes of death tightened around me,
the snares of Sheol confronted me.
I was confronted with trouble and sorrow.
I called on the name of the LORD,
“Please LORD, rescue my life!”
The LORD is merciful and fair;
our God is compassionate.
The LORD protects the untrained;
I was in serious trouble and he delivered me.
Rest once more, my soul,
for the LORD has vindicated you.
Yes, LORD, you rescued my life from death,
and kept my feet from stumbling.
I will serve the LORD
in the land of the living.
I had faith when I said,

“I am severely oppressed.”
I rashly declared,
“All men are liars.”
How can I repay the LORD
for all his acts of kindness to me?
I will celebrate my deliverance,
and call on the name of the LORD.
I will fulfill my vows to the LORD
before all his people.
The LORD values
the lives of his faithful followers.
Yes, LORD! I am indeed your servant;
I am your lowest slave.
You saved me from death.
I will present a thank offering to you,
and call on the name of the LORD.
I will fulfill my vows to the LORD
before all his people,
in the courts of the LORD’s temple,
in your midst, O Jerusalem.
Praise the LORD!

Observation: This is a psalm of praise, celebrating God’s deliverance of an individual. The author’s prayer has been answered. He can look back on the former threat, celebrating God’s goodness, profess devotion to God, and make a public response of gratitude in the Temple. This psalm is one of the Hallel (praise) psalms (Psalm 113-118) said at Passover and also became associated by Christians with the Lord’s supper.

Application: Reflect on verse 7: “I tell myself, ‘You can be at peace again, because the LORD has been good to you.’” God is an ever-present help. When have you felt at peace? God is the author of peace. You can be at peace again. Take a few moments to be still. Breathe in. Breathe out.

Prayer: Lord, you listen and know all that I face. You gave me life and have never let go of me. Help me to be still enough in this day that I can feel your peace and know you are with me. Amen.

Thursday, July 13

Scripture: Psalm 127

If the LORD does not build a house,
then those who build it work in vain.
If the LORD does not guard a city,
then the watchman stands guard in vain.
It is vain for you to rise early, come home late,
and work so hard for your food.
Yes, he can provide for those whom he loves even when they sleep.
Yes, sons are a gift from the LORD,
the fruit of the womb is a reward.
Sons born during one’s youth
are like arrows in a warrior’s hand.

How blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them!
They will not be put to shame when they confront enemies at the city gate.

Observation: This is a psalm of ascent, a collection (Psalms 120-134) that was “sung” as persons traveled to the Temple in Jerusalem. The author reminds us that all of life’s securities and blessings are gifts from God rather than our own achievements. Verses 1-2 proclaim that God provides shelter, security and sustenance. Verses 3-5 proclaim the importance of a strong family. The city “gate” functioned like a courthouse.

Application: Having a nice house may be part of the American dream, but it does not necessarily fulfill the will of God. Having a crime-free neighborhood does little good if we have nothing to live for except possessions. Even having a family can be a way of escaping God’s will. “It is pointless... because God gives sleep to those he loves.” When are you being still enough to seek and to listen for what God provides?

Prayer: God, I confess that there are times when my days are filled striving after those things that I hope will make my life complete. I fear that giving up or letting go will hurt me and those around me. Give me the courage to slow down and seek your direction. Amen.

Friday, July 14

Scripture: Psalm 62

For God alone I patiently wait;
he is the one who delivers me.
He alone is my protector and deliverer.
He is my refuge; I will not be upended.
How long will you threaten a man?
All of you are murderers,
as dangerous as a leaning wall or an unstable fence.
They spend all their time planning how to bring him down.
They love to use deceit;
they pronounce blessings with their mouths,
but inwardly they utter curses. (Selah)
Patiently wait for God alone, my soul!
For he is the one who gives me confidence.
He alone is my protector and deliverer.
He is my refuge; I will not be upended.
God delivers me and exalts me;
God is my strong protector and my shelter.
Trust in him at all times, you people!
Pour out your hearts before him!
God is our shelter! (Selah)
Men are nothing but a mere breath;
human beings are unreliable.
When they are weighed in the scales,
all of them together are lighter than air.
Do not trust in what you can gain by oppression!
Do not put false confidence in what you can gain by robbery!
If wealth increases, do not become attached to it!
God has declared one principle;
two principles I have heard:

God is strong,
and you, O Lord, demonstrate loyal love.
For you repay men for what they do.

Observation: Some scholars suggest that the author of this psalm was sick; some suggest the author was persecuted and had fled to the Temple for asylum; and some even classify the psalm as a prayer for help. God is not directly addressed until the final verse and even then it is not a request for an expression of trust. In verse 1 and 5, the word “rest” is an expression not of what is found after the crisis has passed but what endures through the challenges.

Application: What is rest? You can do nothing and not find rest. Rest is a gift from God. It is peace of mind and spirit. It is a non-anxious presence. Jesus said, “Don’t worry about your life... Instead, desire first and foremost God’s kingdom...” (Matthew 6:25, 33) Breathe in. Breathe out. Be still...

Prayer: In the stillness of this moment, O God, help me to let go of any worry, any concern, any fear. Fill that space with your rest. Use me to lead others to also find rest in you. Amen.

Saturday, July 15

Scripture: Psalm 42

As a deer longs for streams of water,
so I long for you, O God!

I thirst for God,
for the living God.

I say, “When will I be able to go and appear in God’s presence?”

I cannot eat, I weep day and night;

all day long they say to me, “Where is your God?”

I will remember and weep!

For I was once walking along with the great throng to the temple of God,
shouting and giving thanks along with the crowd as we celebrated the holy festival.

Why are you depressed, O my soul?

Why are you upset?

Wait for God!

For I will again give thanks
to my God for his saving intervention.

I am depressed,

so I will pray to you while I am trapped here in the region of the upper Jordan,
from Hermon, from Mount Mizar.

One deep stream calls out to another at the sound of your waterfalls;
all your billows and waves overwhelm me.

By day the LORD decrees his loyal love,
and by night he gives me a song,
a prayer to the living God.

I will pray to God, my high ridge:

“Why do you ignore me?”

Why must I walk around mourning
because my enemies oppress me?”

My enemies’ taunts cut into me to the bone,
as they say to me all day long, “Where is your God?”

Why are you depressed, O my soul?

Why are you upset?
Wait for God!
For I will again give thanks
to my God for his saving intervention.

Observation: The author of this psalm longs for God's presence. We are given a picture of an utterly dried-out person, who likens God's saving presence to life-giving water. A refrain of either inner doubts or taunts by others ("Where is your God now?") is repeated as if to indicate just how desperate the author thirsts for God in the low moments of life.

Application: Hope and despair are part of living – often experienced simultaneously. In his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (John 12:27), even Jesus could not escape this longing of the soul. What words or phrases speak to you in this psalm?

Prayer: Like a deer that craves streams of water, my whole being craves you, O God. Touch me and heal my brokenness, and lift me out of despair and doubt. Dry the tears of pain and sorrow. Comfort and nourish me with the many blessings of your great love. O God, let me flourish and blossom in the presence of your healing love and grace. Amen.