



Breath of God
Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (January 7, 2024)

When our heart is under stress, we need to slow down, even stop, and catch our breath. When the pain is strong, our lungs compress and can't seem to remember to breathe. When we feel depressed, disillusioned, or defeated, we colloquially say the wind has been taken out of our sails.

Breath figures frequently in Scripture. Ruah, God's breath or Spirit, hovers over the chaos in creation in Genesis. Breath or Spirit enters the nostrils of the just created people. Breath or Spirit is breathed onto the disciples by Jesus when he appears to them after his resurrection.

Of course, breathing has two phases: breathing in and breathing out. You can hold your breath for some time, but there is no way to hold it forever. We all played the game of holding our breath under water to see how long we could resist. We also hold our breath in awe when in the presence of stunning beauty, or when scared and paralyzed in fear. But even when we are touched deeply, whether by beauty or by evil, we need to remember to breathe a fresh breath of new life and respond calmly and skillfully to the initial shock of whatever challenging situation.

There is much in today's gospel story that should leave us in breathless awe.

The baptism of Jesus describes a mystical experience. Jesus, whose life we know nothing about since he returned with his parents from Egypt, journeys to an arid region of the Jordan, probably near Jerico, to hear John's message. His was a retreat into the wilderness to be renewed by John's prophetic message.

He was brought up a Jew and learned about the stories of ancient Israel, the calling of father Abraham and the rest of the patriarchs. He must have heard of king David of whom he was a legitimate descendent. And he was certainly aware of the prophets who spoke of the Day of the Lord to come, a day of redemption and renewal in God's kingdom.

Jesus must have heard his mother, Mary, sing about God's faithfulness and promise of liberation and how God favors the lowly and the hungry over the rich and the proud. I can imagine him struck in wonder as he begged his mother every time she went to tuck him in bed to recount yet again how the angel Gabriel announced to her that she was God's favored.

He goes to hear John because he wants to remain connected to the sacred story. And he wants to remain connected with those who suffer.

While Jesus may not have had anything to repent, he chose to line up behind and along common folks who openly professed their sins. His was an act of **solidarity** and **identification**: when one is captive, all are captive. He understood and embraced humanity fully apart from sin. He did not sin and yet, he became sin for us.

Karl Barth shrewdly suggested that "Jesus was not being theatrical. When Jesus was baptized, he needed to be washed of sin: not his sin, but *our* sin. When faced by the sins of all others, he did not let these sins be theirs, but as the Son of His Father, ordained from all eternity to be the brother of these fatal brethren, caused them to be His own sins. No one who came to the Jordan was as laden and afflicted as He."¹

As Jesus rises from the waters, the Spirit, the breath of God, descends like a dove. Jesus, having held his breath under the water, rises as a sign of death and life for us, breathing in and out. The Spirit, God's breath of new life, descends in the form of a dove, filling him with **power** and **purpose**. He receives an infusion of divine energy and guidance. He receives a word of loving affirmation, "you are my beloved child."² All three Persons of the Holy Trinity are fully present in this vignette.

¹ Church Dogmatics, IV.4

² The Greek word translated "beloved" indicates God's choice more than God's feelings.

Jesus' baptism appears to be a rite of passage, marking the first steps in the transition from private to public ministry. His baptism invites him to embrace his **vocation** as God's messenger, teacher, and healer. Jesus' vocation is unique to him and sets him apart as God's healer and savior.

Yet, Jesus' vocational consciousness awakens us to our own unique vocations to be God's companions in healing the world and creating something new: God's work, our hands.

This affirmation – you are God's beloved – is God's word to all of God's children, whether or not they are baptized. Grace comes to all of us. There is no division between chosen and lost; all are chosen, beloved, through God's life-giving love and energy. Today's readings call us to affirm boldly and with confidence: “God loves me dearly,” “God has faith in me,” and “God has a vision for my life.”

Indeed, we are loved because we are God's children, not in spite of who we are or what we've done. Like a newborn baby, we don't need to achieve anything to be loved. Grace is a gift of God, just as is our life and our breath: freely given. And so is our Baptism. We can't make it happen. We are simply called to *receive* it with gratitude. And we show our gratitude by what we do with it (our life, our breath, our Baptism.)

All lives matter, our life matters; all are beloved. This has obvious interpersonal and political implications. Those whom God loves must be treated with grace and affirmation and given full opportunity to realize their divine potential.

Mark 1 depicts Jesus arriving on a hostile scene, being baptized, and then striding into a wilderness to do battle with beasts. Jesus is not beloved after he has faced the devil's temptations and won. He was not chosen after he passed the test. His “beloved-ness” affirms his and our identity and relationship to the Father. We are God's and we are loved. And that presents us with a choice. For Jesus (and for us) a line is drawn in the sand, a taking of sides in a cosmic battle. It doesn't get any political than this. We may choose to remain faithful, or we may forget who and whose we are. What's gonna be?

Orthodox priest and theologian, Alexander Schmemmann, reminds us of the historic act of exorcism in Baptism, and why it matters more than ever: “The exorcisms mean this: to face evil, to acknowledge its reality, to know its power, and to proclaim the power of God to destroy it... The first act of the Christian life is a renunciation, a challenge. No one can be Christ’s until he has, first, faced evil, and then become ready to fight it. How far is this spirit from the way in which we often ‘sell’ Christianity today!”³

Consider how this reflects the Spirit’s power in Jesus and then in our baptism. In baptism, the gift is not just one of repentance and forgiveness, but, as the Acts text emphasizes, also involves the Spirit living and acting in the baptized. While it is a gift for our own lives, like the gift of breathing in, it is also encouragement and life, a breathing out of the Spirit into the world. Baptism is both for our own sake and for the world. In our baptism, we breathe in forgiveness and reconciliation and breathe out the Spirit in our life and works. That’s the full life of the baptized disciple.

Let us remain in awe of our breath, freely given by God for the purpose of living a meaningful life. Let us receive it with gratitude and breath out appreciation as we live out our vocation. Let the sound of God’s word of affirmation, “beloved,” take hold of our hearts. Amen.

³ Alexander Schmemmann, For the Life of the World