

Breathe, Just Breathe
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When I started thinking about this week's brief comments, presented in light of today's ordination and installation and Communion service – for some reason I found myself focused on the idea of taking a breath.

As I am sure you know, there are two times of the year that place great demands on liturgical communities, such as ours: Advent and Christmas; Lent and Easter. During the weeks associated with each of those major times of observance – well, if you are at all involved in worship planning and services – your life is not your own! And, in truth, it is a good thing, now and then, to suspend our own priorities and release oneself to the Spirit and the traditions, trusting that we will be given enough energy and guidance to make it through. And, in fact, we do.

It is a time, though, of some anxiety and shortness of breath, whether in church planning or preparation for the busy times in our daily lives.

And then at the stroke of midnight or thereabouts on Christmas morning – we exhale and the process of recuperation begins, benefited by the glow of all that has transpired. In itself, it seems, the recuperation is therapeutic and transformative. We are recharged, reinvigorated and ready to go, again, and again!

Still....breathing...

As fate might have it, I stumbled across the four stages of breathing used often in Yoga: Puraka – the inhalation; Abhyantara Kumbhaka – the full pause; Rechaka – the Exhalation; and Bahya Kumbhaka, the empty pause. It caught my attention.

The literature talks about learning to breathe following these rules - gradually: [demonstrate]. Slowly you become comfortable with the process, and as you do - your oxygen enriched blood makes it possible to extend the full pause.

I actually spent an hour this morning, sitting quietly, breathing in this fashion and visualizing these comments to you. As I moved into the rhythm of the breathing – it felt very right. True, I needed to consciously enter into the pattern of breathing as I described – but there was something very natural about it, which made it a bit easier to sustain, as time went by.

Shortly after I stopped the meditation and began getting ready to leave my home, I was on to other thoughts and my breathing just went about breathing.

Later, when I returned to the final drafting and editing of this morning's reflection, it struck me that breath and spirit, so often used as metaphors for one another, enter into our being in much the same way, at least for me.

For example, I have these sometimes intense periods of awareness of God's presence – often brought on by the need for God's presence. When that happens, I am consciously aware of God, praying, meditating, speaking with others about God – and the result is the same as when I am consciously aware of my breathing: it feels right; I become centered; calmed; tranquil; assured that everything will be ok.

Then the time in question passes, and while I don't forget about God altogether, that "conscious level of contact" subsides a bit and I stroll along until the next time, when, for whatever reason – I find myself stopped, breathing more slowly and fully, contemplating and present – with God all about. Like now. Like when we all laid hands on Eric, this morning. Like when we are together and we now there is "more to the together" than we can see.

It is so important for me to pause and remember these things. It is what keeps me in my place, remembering that I need to breathe and I need God. And, maybe, I think, in some way God needs me to need God. Not sure on that, but I am sure there is a mutuality about all this.

A bit confusing, but confusion is part order of this day, which depending on your tradition – you find yourself observing the Epiphany: also know as the Day of the Magi; the Second Christmas; or by many other names. According to tradition, we recognize this as the day when the three kings came to visit Jesus in the stable – and by that visit and their recognition - announced his birth to all of humankind – announcing that a king had been born.

Along with the traditional meaning of this day, I am thinking of the word "Epiphany," itself. In its daily use, the word has the connotation of a sudden intuitive leap of understanding, especially through an ordinary but striking occurrence. An "Aha" moment, if you will.

I think we are "People of the Aha!" For us, the epiphany has already occurred, I think, or we wouldn't be here. Something more than the long arm of our upbringing brings us here, today, as adults to this community, entering this sacred place with those we love. It is, then, I think – a day also to remember that: to recall what it was that touched us deeply inside in some way, what it was that led us here and keeps us here.

Today's lectionary readings challenged me in making connections to all this without being forceful about it, especially the I Kings reading about Solomon. Yet, the more I thought about it – the vision that Solomon had in his dream was truly a time of pause – full pause, full of spirit – wherein he stopped and looking out over

the vastness of the kingdom he had inherited and the people he would lead – asked only for wisdom to do God’s will. How’s that for a dream?!

I mean, that’s it. Seeking that harmony and willingness to open ourselves to the breath and spirit of God in such a way that we let go of the reins and submit ourselves to the loving guidance – the *hesedh* – of God: well, when I get to that place – all is well. I’m more relaxed, I breathe more easily, I am thinking of others in terms of my relationship to God, my thoughts are less of myself –

Yes, Solomon, for all his human conditions – had it exactly right.

His glorious reign lost its glimmer and its promise when he forgot that he was only a man, maybe forgetting the vision and the dream. It must be very difficult to remember such things when you are full with power, prestige, wealth, and the adoration and adulation of others (forced or otherwise).

And so, 900 years or so after Solomon, in the small town of Bethlehem Jesus is born. Jesus who would go on to establish the presence of God in a way that no king before or since was able to do. There was on that day of his birth a great pause in divine and human history – a pause that was and is full with the celebration, newness, and hope of the Christmas white and gold. A savior was born. Finally. No more prophets or kings...

Some hundred or so years after his death, John would write the words that we read this morning. “I am the bread who came down from heaven.” *Ego eimi artos ho kalabaino ef ouranos.*

The bread that came down from heaven...

This morning, when we celebrate communion and offer the words of institution – think of this reading. Jesus is saying that we need to enter into his life: become as he is in flesh and blood – and spirit; and we will be fed for eternity. Jesus is the sustenance, the way to the breath of life that is full with the spirit. All we need to do is breathe, that is, to live – as he did, according to the teachings we follow...teachings that lead us to God, however we may know God.

Breathe....

I am not glossing over the difficulties with the text, and there are several: from the male dominated language of John, to John’s clear intention to counter other teachings of the times in ways that reflect what we refer to as *his High Christology*. We’ll get to that in the time ahead.

But for now, let’s thank John for the time to make us pause, as he leads us toward Jesus in a real and mystical and eternal way, all at once.

And that's a good place to pause and take a breath.

Sometimes that's all we need to do.