

2020-06-21 Breath and Breathing

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott Austin]

Well, good morning again. We are now in week three of a series on the Trinity – the idea that God is both three and one, that we know God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (or if you prefer, Holy Parent, Holy Child, Holy Spirit). And so far in this series on Trinity, I've been mostly talking about how Jesus the Son reveals what is true about the Father. And today, in a sermon entitled “Breath and Breathing,” I want to share a story from scripture that spotlights the work of the Holy Spirit. But before I share that story, let's remind ourselves why this matters: because our view of God affects our view of everything and everyone else in the world. If you know a religious person who is angry and vindictive and judgemental, chances are pretty good that that person imagines a God who is angry, vindictive, and judgemental. On the other hand, if you come to know a God who is eternally loving, forgiving, and as I said last week, always emptying but never empty, then you will come to be a person who is loving, who is forgiving, who is always emptying yourself, always pouring yourself out, but who remains filled with God's goodness.

And so, in the past couple of weeks we've been quite blessed, I think, to learn that Jesus is the full and final revelation of God, and God's heart for humankind. That Jesus – who took on all the worst of our sin in his body and returned not wrath, but forgiveness – that that is what God is like. That's what God has always been like, and what God always will be like. But, if the crucified, forgiving Son reveals the love of the triune God, then the rushing wind of the Holy Spirit reveals the wild, unpredictable, seemingly reckless inclusion of God. And that's what today's story begins to show us. Now I say, “begins to show us,” very much on purpose. One thing that perhaps I should have been saying all along during this series is that this profound trinitarian theology is... it's a mystery. I don't say that to mean that you don't have to think about it, that you should just give up on understanding it – quite the contrary! I say it so that you will know that it's normal and expected to have this truth be revealed to you bit-by-bit, as it begins to dawn on your deepest subconsciousness and slowly begins to emerge to the level of

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understanding. And that's what's happened for me in my own life. Even in these last few weeks that's been happening for me. So, don't feel bad if all of this talk about Trinity makes you feel a little bit like you are underwater. It's just the beginning; you can ride that wave.

So, in a moment I'm going to read to you a few verses from the book of Acts, chapter 10. And we'll have those on the screen, but if you have your own Bible and want to get it open to Acts 10, that's where I'll be. Now, there are about 40 verses of backstory in this chapter that lead up to the story that I'm going to read to you, not to mention the nine chapters of backstory that came before chapter 10 in the book of Acts. But if you think about it [chuckles], the entire Bible is backstory and we do have to draw the line somewhere, so I'm not going to try to give you *all* of the backstory, but I do want to tell you that leading up to this point in Acts chapter 10, it's important that you know that the early Christians understood their religion as blossoming out of their Jewish identity (which it did), but that they did not expect the Christian religion to transcend that Jewish identity. Now, they had many good reasons to believe that, including a long history and tradition, some of which was based on portions of their holy scripture – the Hebrew Bible. And that will be important for us to keep in mind as we begin to try to apply this story to our own day.

But, leading up to this point in chapter 10, the Holy Spirit began to do some work in two people's hearts and minds. One was the Apostle Peter, who was a Jewish Christian, and the other was a Gentile follower of God named Cornelius. And although these two men, by all accounts, should not have been fraternizing with one another, the Spirit brought them together. And not only that, but the Spirit brought together a whole group of Jewish believers with a whole group of Gentiles (outsiders). And we pick up on what happened in verse 44. This is Acts 10:44:

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, ⁴⁶ for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, ⁴⁷ “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” ⁴⁸ So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

So, I've been framing my sermons during this Trinity series with the phrase “if Trinity is true, then...”. And so in this case, I want to say that if Trinity is true, then the work of the Spirit in the

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book of Acts is the accomplishing of what was always God's desire for humanity, which is that we would be one in spite of our differences. That, as Paul writes in the book of Galatians: "There is no longer any Jew or Greek," meaning Gentile, "there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

By the way, I'm reading a book called *The Forgotten Creed* that argues that this verse from Galatians was actually a version of the original baptismal creed. We usually think of the baptismal creed as turning into the Apostles' Creed, which we said earlier in our service together. This author is arguing that, in fact, this verse from the book of Galatians – there's no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male and female, but you're all one – the argument is that that is the original creed of people who are being baptized as Christians. And that's beautiful to me, because can you imagine a Christian faith that had this idea as its central doctrine – that we are all one, despite the many characteristics and differences that might otherwise divide us? That, regardless of race or of class or of gender, we are all children of God in the Spirit, and that to be baptized into this faith was first and foremost to acknowledge that reality? That's beautiful to me.

But again, if Trinity is true, we should witness the work of the Holy Spirit and consider it to be part of God's ongoing work – past, present, and future. If Trinity is true, first of all, we can expect the Holy Spirit to welcome people into the family of God who we will be astounded are welcomed in. Look at verse 45 from Acts 10: "The believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God." See, when they saw the evidence of the Spirit in these Gentiles – and you may recall, if you know the backstory, that it was the same evidence of the Spirit that the believers had experienced themselves on the day of Pentecost; that's why speaking in tongues is so important in this particular passage, because what the people who are already Christians were witnessing is these Gentiles being given the same exact gift by the Spirit that they had received on the day of Pentecost, and they were astounded.

Let me ask you this: When was the last time that you were astounded, specifically by someone being welcomed into God's family who you didn't expect should have been welcomed into God's family? I would just gently want to say that if the answer is never, that might be a "you problem," or an "us problem," not a Holy Spirit problem, because the evidence here is that the Spirit is drawing people into God's family who believers never expected to be welcomed. That's the first "if Trinity is true" for today: We should expect to see people being welcomed in who we don't expect to be welcomed in.

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Here's the second one: If Trinity is true, then we had better get ready to baptize some people who we did not think were ready to be baptized, we did not think were able to be adopted into God's family. I love how quickly Peter – the Apostle, the leader here – sees what is happening, changes his entire opinion about who is welcomed into God's family, and immediately converts that energy into an official ritual of welcoming them into the Christian faith. And he does it by asking this rhetorical question: “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” Among Bible-aware people, Peter kind of gets a lot of criticism for being very impulsive, acting quickly, for being rash; but in this case, it seems to have served him pretty well, because as soon as he saw the Spirit giving the gifts to the Gentiles, he *knew* that God's plan was bigger than his plan, and that his job as the leader was to make it official, was to baptize these people – who had, after all, received the Holy Spirit, just the same as everybody else had. You see, they wanted to create a boundary around this new faith, and the Holy Spirit was not interested in staying inside that boundary. And if we, as the church in the 21st century – if I, as a pastor, am not willing to look around me and see the Holy Spirit at work in places where I don't expect the Spirit to be at work and therefore to change my mind about where the boundary might actually be placed, then I'm not acknowledging the Trinity in my practical theology. So, that's the second one.

Here's a third one: If Trinity is true, we might want to be prepared for the possibility that it's not we who are inviting others, but others who are inviting us. I want you to look now at verse 48: “Peter ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, then they invited him to stay for several days.” So, not only is this surprising because it's already been stated earlier that Jews are not supposed to even enter the home of a Gentile, let alone stay for a while, but it's especially surprising because the the new Gentile believers extended this invitation of hospitality to the established Christian believers who had already brought this with them. See, just as soon, *just as soon* as Peter finishes being the one to welcome these Gentiles, the tables are turned and they become the ones who welcome him. You see how this ordering of society is completely inverted? I wonder what word that has for us if we want to live into the trinitarian vision that the Holy Spirit gives us in this story. What are the ways in which we might automatically think of ourselves as being the ones who need to reach out and help other people that are going to get inverted, so that we find no, in fact, we are just as much in need of being welcomed, of receiving hospitality, as those who we thought we were there to help?

I want to conclude today with a brief word nerd digression. I will be brief with this, but you know how I love the language aspects of this and I think you might like this, too. The word “spirit,” in both of the primary biblical languages (that is to say, both in Hebrew and in Greek) literally means “wind” or “breath.” Wind, breath, spirit – all the same word, generally, in

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scripture, whether we're talking about the Hebrew Bible or the Greek New Testament. By the way, it's also a grammatically feminine word in some of the biblical languages, so if you want to refer to the Holy Spirit with she/her pronouns, you can be my guest! So, if you think back over the stories of the Bible, all the way back to creation, and you see the wind from God sweeping over the waters of creation, that wind can be understood to be the Holy Spirit. In the next chapter, in the second creation story, when the Creator breathes life into the nostrils of Adam (the prototypical human), that breath can be understood to be the Holy Spirit. Much later in the story, when Jesus breathes on his disciples and says, "Peace I give you; my peace I leave with you," that breath can be understood to be the Holy Spirit. And so, if you're out and about and there's a breeze, or if you're noticing the wind, maybe that'll be a reminder for you that the Holy Spirit is still active today – that that same wind hovered over the waters of creation.

And it's not lost on me that we're thinking a lot about how we breathe these days, since our breath, our respiration seems to be the main way that the coronavirus spreads. That's why we wear masks when we're in public, right? My mask protects you; your mask protects me. And I wonder if all of that focus on breathing in and breathing out, all of that awareness of how our breath comes into contact with and affects other people, I wonder if that might remind us of this work of the Holy Spirit. as well. I wonder if that might remind us of the throwing wide open of the doors to God's kingdom that seems to be what the Holy Spirit was interested in doing. It seems to be the particular aspect of the nature of the triune God that's revealed in the giving of the spirit. I wonder [audibly inhales] if every breath you inhale can be a reminder that God's Spirit sustains you and gives you life. I wonder if every breath you [audibly exhales] exhale can be a reminder that you can participate in the making of God's world, that you can offer life to those around you, that you can breathe the peace of Christ into the world. And I wonder – if, as we breathe in and breathe out, as we inhale and exhale this breath, this Holy Spirit – I wonder if we might also be reminded that the wind blows where it will, that whatever our expectations are for where we might see God at work – and particularly for *in whom* we might see God at work – that those expectations are almost going to be too limited. I wonder if, as we breathe in and breathe out, we could be reminded of the radical inclusion that's inherent to a triune God. And I wonder if we might be bold enough to think about our traditions, and even our holy scriptures, in ways that make room for this particular work of God that's made real to us in the Holy Spirit. It's not an easy thing to do, but what a powerful movement of God it would be.

I'm gonna ask you to take just a moment of silence to reflect on that, to ask God what questions you might have, to hear from God what questions God might be asking of you, and then we'll take communion together. Holy Spirit, speak. Your church is listening.

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[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](https://www.ArtisanChurch.com).