

Rev Rita Message February 28 2021

The act of breathing is an amazing and miraculous process. It is an involuntary process that our bodies engage in independently from conscious volition. Being connected to our breath is intimate; our very lives depend on breathing regularly and yet, for the most part, we often forget and disconnect from this important relationship with our bodies.

The ancient Jewish idea of the Spirit of God was expressed in the Hebrew word, "*Ruah*," which literally means "breath." When the Hebrew Bible (what we call the Old Testament) was translated into Greek, "*ruah*" was translated as *pneuma*, the word from which we get the word pneumonology (the study of the respiratory system) and the word pneumonia.

So, in the first book of the Bible, in the first chapter, in only the second line, when the author of Genesis says that the "earth was formless and empty. Darkness was on the surface of the deep. The *wind of God* was hovering on the surface of the waters." the word for "wind" is *ruah* – breath. Literally, the breath of God was the animating element in the earth's creation. When God breathes the breath of life into lifeless dust – suddenly there is life where there had been no life and humanity is created in the image of God.

Centuries after Elijah listened deeply and heard the still, small voice of God, another prophet by the name of Ezekiel has a vision of a valley full of "dry bones" God tells the prophet Ezekiel to "prophesy" - essentially, once again, to breathe the spirit of God onto lifeless bones – and suddenly, once again, there was life where there had been no life before.

In Ezekiel's own context, the "dry bones" are Israel. As with a lot of prophets, Ezekiel wrote with the experience of the exile in his mind – with the people forced out of their homeland after being conquered by Babylon. Ezekiel wrote shortly after the exile; within a few years of that event. They were still in shock; still wondering what had gone wrong; still wondering what they had done wrong; perhaps wondering if their God was really God. And, as often happens, they found themselves in a collective state of shock had found themselves lifeless, with seemingly nothing left to care about. Everything they cherished had been taken away from them; all that they had believed and placed their faith in suddenly seemed meaningless. This vision of putting "breath" by God's Spirit into the bones showed that God would not only restore them physically but also spiritually.

You see, this is the way of God. God is the giver of life; God, in a sense, is life itself. When God's breath – or God's Spirit (because the words are the same in both Greek and Hebrew) - is breathed upon you, abundant life suddenly appears where before life had been dry and stagnant, and glorious hope suddenly appears where before things had seemed dark and hopeless. When the word of God is breathed upon you, the most amazing things can happen.

Breath prayer is an ancient Christian prayer practice. It was the Desert Fathers and Mothers withdrawing into the Egyptian desert about three centuries after Christ to pray and meditate on God's word, who really developed breath prayers as a spiritual discipline. Evidently, they would often sit outside their cells weaving baskets and contemplating Christ's presence in quiet solitude meditating on short, one breath prayers. They breathed in God's word slowly and deeply, reverently repeating the prayer over and over, letting it permeate their minds and descend into their hearts. Sometimes they would breathe their prayer before going to sleep at night, repeating it until it lodged deep in their souls. When they woke in the morning the prayer was still on their lips.

Breath prayer engages the physical body and helps us experience God's presence in our bodies and in the physical world, integrating the physical and spiritual parts of our lives. Focusing on our breath slows down our breathing, which has the effect of slowing down all bodily functions, a way to experience peace from the One who gives us breath and longs to give us peace. Breath prayer also reminds us of the Holy Spirit, the breath of God in our lives.

One way to engage in breath prayer is to imagine breathing out all our concerns and worries into God's presence, while breathing in God's love and care. At the Areopagus in Athens, the Apostle Paul said about God, "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17: 28). If God's presence and love surround us, then it is not a stretch to imagine exhaling our troubles into God's presence and inhaling God's love and care with each breath.

Breath prayer is a good example of "praying without ceasing" as Paul instructed us to do, and has the potential to become as natural as breathing. It is intended to be a very short prayer of praise or petition, just six to eight syllables. The words of the prayer can be easily adjusted to your heart's desire

Breath prayer has been practiced in the church for millennia. It is a form of contemplative prayer linked to the rhythms of breathing. Contemplative prayer is prayer that is focused on being with God, awakening to his presence in all things. Contemplative prayer in some forms can be prayer without words, or few words. This allows us to be released from thinking too much about praying the "right words," being in our heads too much as we pray, and being released into praying with our hearts instead. This is why breath prayer is also called "prayer of the heart."

A breath prayer might be breathing in slowly as deep as you can while you think "Be still and know that I am God...") Now that takes a long breath that fills up your lungs! Hold your breath... then exhale and repeat.

Or a breath prayer might be breathing in "I receive your peace", and breathing out "release my anxiety" or perhaps breathing in "I listen" and breathing out "You are here."

We can't live without breathing physically, we can't live without breathing spiritually with God as the source of oxygen to our souls. Edwin Hatch's wonderful hymn, *Breathe on Me, Breath of God*, puts the call to be open to God's Spirit this way,

Breathe on me, breath of God,
Blend all my soul with Thine,
Until this earthly part of me
Glows with Thy fire divine.

So.... Take a deep breath.... Let the breath of God into your life. Amen.