

Breath of God

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One of my favorite artists is Mark Rothko. Best known for his imposingly large paintings, dark, with deep blocks of color.

At first blush they do not look like much. Color furiously applied in large rectangles.

But there is a mysterious power to these paintings for me, and many others.

Rothko instructed people stand about 18 inches away from his enormous canvases, so that they were all you can see. From this vantage point they loom. Kind of like that slight dizziness you can get starting directly up the side of a sky-scaper.

British art critic Simon Schama expresses it well. He says they breathe, they pulse, they fill like sails.

His ability to create something that is admittedly still, yet feels so dynamic, is to me one of the great achievements in the history of art.

When you are great artist of any kind, people will ask, what inspires you.

Rotko answered this question many ways. He famously said, that he did not want to paint about experiences, he wanted the paintings themselves to be an experience.

He talked about his painting as a religious experience, confessing that he often wept while painting.

But when really pressed to give expression to the mysterious source of his inspiration, Rotko again and again simply called it “the breath of life.”

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Have you ever felt inspired?

Perhaps in a moment of artistic expression, or with a new idea of how to arrange a room.

Perhaps you have been inspired with uncharacteristic bravery to speak a word of love. Or challenge.

Perhaps you have been inspired to take a stand for what is right, even at personal risk.

Perhaps you have found yourself inspired by a beautiful scene in the natural world. Not inspired to, *do* anything really, but just uplifted, transported, filled with a new sense of the power of God.

We use this word to mean a lot of different things.

Yet what they all share is a certain mysteriousness. We experience inspiration as something that comes from beyond ourselves, or from someplace deep within us.

It is beyond the ordinary choices we make day to day. It is something different all together.

And the word itself carries that meaning. In-spire. Literally means to 'blow into.' It is the best our language can do to express the feeling of inspiration, that some new breath has filled us.

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In today's reading, Jesus is offering what is known as his farewell discourse to his disciples. Having told them that he will soon die, he is giving his final words of instruction and love.

In the portion we just heard, Jesus is anticipating the disciples most urgent question: what are we going to do without you? How will we go on?

After all, in Jesus, God had come to dwell with them, to walk with them, to stand by them in the struggles of life, to heal them, and feed them, and give them hope.

What would happen when he was gone?

Jesus says, when I leave, God will send the Spirit.

A little vague, not quite as concrete as a person you can reach out and touch. But Jesus goes on to describe this Spirit that will come to them after he is gone.

The spirit is your advocate, Jesus says.

The spirit will speak for me.

The spirit will guide you in truth. Will prove the world wrong. And will glorify God.

The Spirit will come to fill your lives. We might say, the Spirit will come to inspire you.

And in fact, that is not far off.

Because the connection between inspiration and breath is not only true in English, but it is expressed in the Greek language of the Bible as well.

Pneuma. Pneuma is the word meaning Spirit.

It is easy in English to see the idea of God's Spirit, and imagine it in lofty and complex terms.

But the word pneuma is a simple Greek word.

It means breath.

It is why we call air-powered things Pneumatic.

It is why our most common lung problem is called Pneumonia.

Pneuma means breath.

So what is the Holy Spirit?

The breath of God.

The Holy Spirit is the breath of God.

It is the force by which God draws us inward. Into God's own heart.

And it is the mysterious confronting breath, that comes to us from beyond, or from deep within. The source of our inspiration.

The breath of God.

Have you ever felt inspired? Have you ever felt drawn inward by the breath of God? Have you ever felt the power of God's spirit filling you with love, or courage, or hope, so profound it felt as though it came from beyond you?

Sometimes it could be hard to know.

Often the breath of God brushes us gently. If we are not paying attention. We might miss it.

I sometimes feel the breath of God as a gentle shiver, during one of Matthew's Preludes, or in the way my heart lifts when I see someone I love.

God's breath. God's spirit.

It is this breath that hovers over the waters of creation's first day.

It is this breath that descends to Christ at his baptism.

This breath that blew as tongues of flame into the apostles' lives and hearts on Pentecost.

It is that Spirit that stirred in Martin Luther King when he crumpled up his prepared remarks and spoke from his heart, "I have a dream..."

It is that Spirit that calls faithful people through prison doors, to offer compassion and love to the forgotten.

It is that Spirit that inspires people to offer their lives in service to the needs of their community, rather than the needs of themselves.

And most incredibly, is when Jesus, speaking to his friends, telling them that soon he will die. Facing their stunned eyes drained of hope, says:

And this is for the best.

It is to your advantage that I go away. For if I did not go. The spirit would not come.

You couldn't blame the disciples if they felt differently. After all, who among us would not prefer to have God standing beside us, touching our wounded bodies and making them whole, speaking the perfect word to thaw our hearts, standing beside us giving us the courage to face down the world's evil.

But no, Jesus says. This is better. This breath, to inspire you, to stir you, to comfort and fill you.

This is better.

Not me.

The breath of God.

How could that be?

To me, we can find the answer to that question at the beginning.

When God' breath hovered over the waters of creation. When God's breath entered human bodies, making us living images of God.

God looked over creation. Over it all. You and me too. And called us Good.

Good creations, in the image of God, filled with God's own breath.

Imagine if you will, all the good that Jesus could have done if he lived to a ripe old age. If, as the disciples so deeply desired, he dwelt with them for a generation. If for 6 days he healed and taught until, like the great prophets of old, his frail and worn body surrendered his spirt to heaven.

It's an encouraging thought.

But now imagine the world in which we live. Filled with such a diversity of human life. Different languages, cultures, and faiths. Styles of music, dance, and art.

Think of all the capacity that dwells in those lives.

The love all those hearts could live.

The beauty they could unleash.

The hope they could engender.

The communities they could nurture.

Imagine, all those lives, filled with the breath of God. Inspired.

It's better.

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When I was a child my family used to spend the Summer at Rehoboth beach in Delaware.

I remember that early in the morning, before the beach filled up with sunbathers and swimmers for the day, the sky was filled with kites.

No two were the same.

Some were handled with expert precision.

Others seems to dart and dive with a will of their own.

It was an inviting sight.

I think that is Christ's invitation to us.

One by one, to let our kite up into God's Holy breeze. To dance with
the beautiful array.

Imagine.