**[1]** Seventh Sunday after Easter, June 1, 2025
Sermon Title: “Pneuma: Breath of God”
Scripture: Romans 8:26-27
Theme: This is the 1st in a 3-series sermon on the Holy Spirit. In this one, we explore the theological implications of Breath (Ruach/Pneuma)

**[2]** Thursday, May 29th, the Christian community writ-large celebrated Ascension Day. Ascension Day occurs on the 40th day of Easter, or 39 days after Easter Sunday; Eusebius hints in his writings that it was being celebrated in the 4th century CE. Acts 1:3 records that the Risen Jesus appeared in various places for 40 days prior to his Ascension and we mark Ascension Day based on this reference. Strangely enough, Luke 9:51 refers to Ascension Day in the following **[3]** way: “When the day of his Ascension drew near, Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem.” Luke seems to mark a change in the ministry of Jesus based on Ascension Day and not on the crucifixion or Easter, something that might seem odd to many Christians. During the Festival of Homiletics in Atlanta, Georgia, one year, we celebrated Ascension Day Worship at the Peach
**[4]** Tree United Methodist Church, by marching into the sanctuary with large festive banners streaming before us in the air, all singing praise hymns as we marched. A rather large copy of the Bible was held high in the march and was carried up to a podium where it was opened and laid out for the reader who had been assigned to read the day’s scripture. I have not seen anything quite like this any time before or after, a very unique experience for me. When I asked about the theology behind this celebration of Ascension Day (Thursday worship) [with dance flags and streaming banners, and marching a large Bible down the aisle to the front of the sanctuary before reading it], they told me that this worship celebrates embodiment, whether it be in creation, or in the incarnation, or the resurrection, or ascending to heaven in bodily form. The dance pre-announces Pentecost, a little more than a week away as an embodiment of Spirit.

And so, with today being the Seventh Sunday after Easter, and next Sunday being Pentecost, I have leapt ahead in my sermons to Pentecost, offering a 3-series set of sermons on the Holy Spirit, so that I can deliver these prior to my vacation from the pulpit on Jun 22nd, so that I do not have a break in the series. The next three (3) sermons will be a series honoring the Holy Spirit, **[5]** what some of us call the third-person of the Trinity. Now, of course, Disciples have a mixed theological history with regard to the Trinity, but that does not mean that we Disciples are anti-Trinity. If you check into a book entitled ***Chalice Introduction to Disciples Theology***, edited by Peter Goodwin Heltzel, you will find that Chapter 8, in the section called ‘God in Creation,’ has an intriguing title, known as “Singing the Trinity,” In this chapter, Peter refers to our reclaiming of the doctrine of the Trinity as a new Pentecost that celebrates post-colonial global voices living into Trinity as belief and practice. So, with that said, I am preaching an Ascension Day sermon as both the last Sunday of the Easter season and the first of Pentecost, and this is the first of my **[6]** series on the Holy Spirit, this one being on the topic of the Breath of God or the Pneuma of God. We sometimes call this form of the Spirit as the life-giving Power of God. Next Sunday, I will speak on the feminine side of the Spirit known as Shekinah, the nurturing Presence of God, or the Comforter. Then, on Father’s Day, June 15th, I will conclude with a sermon on the form
of the Holy Spirit known as Advocate or Defender, the “Stand-by-me” aspect of the Spirit, the Paraclete of God.  Of course, in reality, all of these forms of the Spirit overlap and flow into each other.  We separate them to talk about them, but we must always remember that they come to us as One Spirit, integrated and complex, with “sighs too deep for words (Rm. 8:26).”

In the second verse of Genesis, the Bible tells us that the Spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters, cherished and brooded over the face of the deep (tehom), relaxing and fluttering over the primordial void and the deep darkness of the “nihilo” (nothing-ness).  In the words of believing scientists today, the Spirit of God is present in the creation of life, the stardust of life waiting to be joined into form and function, the chemicals of life waiting to be stirred into possibility.  The phrase ‘Spirit of God’ identified in this verse of Genesis means literally, ‘the
Breath (Ruach) of God,’ in a practical sense, the deliberate and rational breath of God that wants to get it right, to shape all creation properly with the whole of creation in mind. Proverbs tells us that God created Divine Wisdom as the first act of creation (Proverbs 8:22-23) so that when God drew a circle on the face of the deep (Proverbs 8:27), she (Wisdom) provided the inspiration for that creation.  By all implication, it was a time of constant “overflowing, interweaving, and fusing.”

On the first day of creation, all things flowed together; thoughts, speech, and actions all came together as One, to produce life in one great moment of spiritual fusion:  The Psalmist writes: “When You, O God, send forth your Spirit, [living things both great and small] are created and the face of the earth is renewed.” (Ps. 104:30).  Because thinking, speaking, and action all are fused together, the Bible can declare that God speaks creation and it happens; God calls into existence the things that do not exist (Ps. 33:9; 147:18; Romans 4:17; Hebrews 11:3).  So, we
can certainly infer that, in our most dreaded moments of life, the Holy Spirit of God will give us a fusion of thoughts, speech and deeds by which to respond.  We may not be able to separate this fused gift into its various component parts, but we know it is the Spirit guiding our thoughts, putting words on our lips, and putting energy into our bodies (Luke 12:12; 21:15; Matt. 10:20) to confer the gift of God in the moment of need.

There is another type of ‘breath’ that gets mentioned in Genesis; it is the Breath of Life, the *Nephesh* of God.  This is the spiritual breath of God, the gentle breath of God that we call the “living breath of God.”  *Nephesh* is the breath that transfers life.  Many years ago, in my youth, we called *nephesh* the ‘wiggle in the rabbit.’ It is what makes God’s creatures independent and unique, with a desire to move around on their own initiative.  *Nephesh* is a willful freedom to engage life and make a unique mark upon it.  In this type of breath, the “image of God” is
transferred to our being.  It is the stamp of manufacturing telling the world who made you.  God made you and me.  How do we know God made us?  One way of knowing is because we have free-will, because we are not robots, because we have a choice in what happens to us.  We are not pre-programmed to fate or imprisoned by our destiny.  We can see the resemblances of God in ourselves and in our children.  Our relationships, as broken as these are, reflect a desire to be a part of something larger than ourselves.

Nothing says empathy like a Spirit that knows what we think before we think it (Ps. 44:21), what we do before we do it (Eph. 2:10), and what we are going to say before we say it (Ps. 139:4). In some real sense that we cannot explain in words, God pre-knows us through the intentions of our heart (Acts 1:24). God’s empathy with us should shape our own empathy for others.  If we see our brother’s need and our sister’s need, and we have the resources to meet those needs, then we find ourselves without the Spirit if we ignore those needs (1 John 3:17,24).  In some strange twist of science, the Holy Spirit allows us to arrive at our destination before we ever leave for it.  We are pre-known and pre-loved; this shapes our current and future knowing and loving. We can be empathetic because God was first empathetic with us.  God knows us before we are born because we have the image of God inside of us.  We have the mark of belonging to God.  Alas, many of us do not often act like it, but we do have it.  Our greatest challenge in life is to act like we have that divine mark.  Our greatest failure is in denying it.

**[7]** I keep beside my bed a meditational book called “Jesus Calling,” which I read before going to sleep.  The entry I read this past week relates to the Holy Spirit, the Holy Breath of God.  The meditation suggests that, when we are open to receive the Holy Spirit, God swells our bodies with the Breath of Divine Presence. What an image!  Now, sin is sometimes referred to as a “swelling of the head,” a puffing-up of our defenses, or a fattening of our attitudes. But, this type of swelling is different.  This image is a breathing which swells our lungs with Divine Presence, such as we might imagine if we breathed in the Breath of God.  With such a swelling of Presence, it is no wonder that we can sometimes “sense” the thoughts of God through the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:11).  It is the same principle as the one expressed by Matthew, that God knows what we need before we ask (Matt.  6:8). We sense the will of God through our relationship with God. The Spirit thinks and feels and acts alongside us, and through that Presence, we know unconsciously what God needs before God asks. We pre-know what God will do because of what God has done. The problem comes to us in the form of sin that does not let us shape it into a conscious knowing or remembering.  We pre-know the essence of God’s love, what God’s love requires of us, but we often fearfully forget.  This is the famous sin against the Holy Spirit, that we go to great lengths to mar the image of God within us, to erase the mark of Godliness so that God no longer can recognize God’s creation.

Ancient prophets like Ezekiel embraced the Holy Spirit by inhaling Torah (God’s teaching and law). They hosted the biblical text in their own lives and bodies. Jeremiah’s yoke is an extension of Jeremiah’s message and an extension of his body as well.  Eating the Scroll (Ezek. 3:3) and tasting the Gospel (1 Pet. 2:3; Ps.34:8; 119:103; Heb. 6:5) are metaphors for breathing the Word. The prophets stood out of the world (ecstasy) by standing in the Spirit.  They spoke for the speechless and the voiceless; their ‘breathing’ presence at the crossroads of decision threatened the powerful and the comfortable.

In receiving the Spirit, God pours out Divine Love, Trust and Courage into our hearts (Rom. 5:5).  We overflow with breathless praise and breath-full yearning for justice.  God’s sends the Spirit of God’s Son, another way referring to the Holy Spirit, to speak prayers on our behalf: “Abba! Father!” (Gal. 4:6), one of the most intimate ways of addressing God.  God meets us in our prayers.  These encounters are always more than saying words and naming our feelings. We spend enormous energy in our prayers and get very tired from our praying.  Something happens
**[8]** when we come to the edges of our praying.  Praying becomes a full-body experience. Thomas Merton once wrote: “A prayer is the orientation of our whole body, mind and spirit to God in silence, attention, and adoration.  It is a conversion of our entire self to God.”  Another translation in Romans 8:26 of “sighs too deep for words,” is “groanings which cannot be uttered.”  A poet who is breathless because of too much beauty might think of “sighing,” but a victim who is terrified beyond words might think of “groaning.” This verse speaks to multiple needs in multiple translations.  The Holy Spirit translates our longing into the language of God, a human language without words to a divine language of grace. Terry York, a popular writer at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, writes: “Our deepest prayer is our voice connecting with the voice of the Holy Spirit in a place where our waiting connects with God’s waiting.”

**[9]** The Holy Spirit is a very present helper in our seasons of weakness.  The Holy Spirit provides “power” to those without strength and those who do not know their own strength.  The Greek word for “power” is “dynamis” from which we get our English word ‘dynamic.’  It is used over 120 times in the New Testament to mean the “ability to perform.” Yet, for the believer, it is tapping into our Lord’s ability, to enhance our own. We think of the planet Jupiter as a giant ‘dynamo,’ generating tremendous energy within our solar system; we can even mark the boundaries where the influence of Jupiter’s dynamo begins by a change in sound. The Spirit’s
dynamo is even more tremendous than we can imagine as we enter the influence of that dynamo with a change of sound that reverses the sound of our weakness.  The Psalmist says that we “pant [for the living Spirit of God] as a deer pants for water (Ps. 42:1).  Panting is an act of searching for breath when fresh air is scarce. The Living water of God satisfies our thirst; the living Breath of God gives power to our souls.

One year, while living in Austin, Texas, I met a young artist who was studying for the ministry.
Her art form was painting, and she supplemented her income through various art shows in the area (from Austin, to San Marcos, to New Braunfels, to San Antonio). She was very busy between her licensed ministry studies and preparing for art shows on the weekends. I do not know when she had the time to paint, but she had some very interesting water colors. She asked me if I could arrange for an art show at my Mother’s Assisted Living Center (Stonebridge) in Austin. At the time, I was conducting weekly bible studies for the residents at Stonebridge. I agreed to pitch the idea to the social director at the center. They agreed and set a date for it.
I am sorry I cannot remember her name, but I do remember her paintings, her easel displays filled several rooms in the center. I do not think she was looking for any sales that day from residents or from families, but I think she might have sold one or two. They were excellent paintings. Perhaps the most unique one is one I remember well. She had endeavored to paint the Holy Spirit as the Breath of Creation. This painting was a water color one; and she had taken great effort to put the color of breath on the canvas. No one was in the painting to make that breath, only the breath itself was depicted, hovering over the waters. It was an experiential painting, something that you might attribute to a mysticism in her artistic spirit. She really did not want to sell it, but had put it on display as a “work in progress.” As an artist, she did not think it was ready for prime time yet, but was simply floating it out there to get comments from viewers. I could not think of anytime that I had ever seen an effort to paint the Holy Spirit, and still cannot remember any except this one. And I thought, ‘how bold!’ You might think of it as an attempt, like Michelangelo, to paint the face of God, but this was painting an essence and not a face. It was ethereal, surreal, emotional, passionate, sweet, empowering. The Holy Spirit seemed to linger within the frame, having let itself be captured for a brief moment in time. Might I dare say that she bore a slight resemblance to Divine Wisdom? Yet, in some sense, the breath had no gender; it transcended gender, it cross the boundaries of gender. The Breath of God, Creative and Empowering Spirit!

Come, Holy Spirit, come, into our lives today!  Breathe into us the Breath of Life!
Create in us a life-giving spirit of compassion and grace! Alleluia! Amen.