

Sermon for Ash Wednesday  
Wednesday, February 14, 2024  
“Breathe”

Text: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Do you ever think much about your breathing? Whether the action of breathing comes easy or hard for any of us, we never really have to *think* about breathing, like we have to think about, say, writing an e-mail, taking a walk, talking on the phone, or coming to church. Breathing happens whether we think about it or not. It happens when we're awake and while we're sleeping. It happens constantly, rhythmically, and regularly. I bet you are more aware of your breathing right now, because I mentioned it, but you aren't actually *telling* your body what to do or how to breathe. It just happens; every day, each of us takes about 20,000 breaths. Do you know physically what happens when you take a breath? Maybe, maybe not—and I'm not going to give an anatomy or physiology lesson—but what I *will* say about breathing is that the purpose of breathing is so that we can take in oxygen from the air, the oxygen can go into our lungs, and then be passed into the blood stream to keep our bodies alive. Breathing is essential for life. But in order for the oxygen we inhale to get into our blood stream, the lungs first have to get rid of the carbon dioxide that builds up in our system, which happens when we exhale. For us to take in something good, we first have to get rid of something bad.

Lent is like breathing. Lent helps us get rid of something bad in order to receive something better. The season of Lent helps us let go of things that hold us back, so that we can move forward. Lent is essential for our spiritual—and maybe even our physical—survival. Now I know that when Lent comes around, we think about giving up something. Now, I don't know about you, but Lent sometimes feels annoying, inconvenient, and a nuisance. Every year, I give up meat and alcohol. Now for me not drinking alcohol isn't really that big a deal. I can find good stuff to drink, like iced tea or something, but eating is a bit more challenging. Especially when my mother wants Five Guys or picks a steakhouse for dinner. Thank God, nowadays there are enough vegetarians and vegans around that good restaurants do a pretty decent job of making meatless options taste good. But really, sometimes we can focus too much on what it is we're going to give up and worrying about sticking to it. What I'm about to say may surprise you coming from me, but you don't really have to give up *anything*! If you don't give up something for Lent, you won't be banished to “the other place” when you die. Giving up something for Lent is not essential for eternal life. However, during this life, giving up something serves as a reminder to us when we get distracted by the things we face from day to day. And the reason we give stuff up in the first place is to provide us with an opportunity to let go of the things that pull our attention away from God and our dependence upon him, so that we can spend more time and energy trying to deepen our relationship to God. In order to receive that which is good for us, we must get rid of that which is bad.

Life is full of junk that directs our attention and consumes our energy. We must let go of the things that consume us: guilt, pride, shame, bitterness, greed, lust, resentment, unwillingness to forgive, holding grudges, apathy, complacency. By letting go of these things, we make space for God to fill the void with his presence and his love...and his guidance. St. Augustine said, “Thou must be emptied of that wherewith thou art full, that thou mayest be filled with that whereof thou art empty.” Lent helps us let go. The practice of giving up little things in our lives helps us in letting go of the big things. Like breathing, exhaling the carbon dioxide of our souls helps us inhale the oxygen.

One way to help get rid of spiritual carbon dioxide is through making a sacramental confession. Yes, Episcopalians/Anglicans do confession! I encourage you to look in the *Book of Common Prayer* on page 447. There, you will find the rite for Reconciliation of the Penitent. Read it, think about it, pray about it, and then book an appointment with me to do it. Let go of the shortcomings in your life, the hurt, the barriers holding you or your spirit back, and make space for God to fill the void with his love, patience, acceptance, and mercy.

Because we have only one life to live, and God wants us to make the most of it and he really wants us to live our best life. Lent helps remind us that it is only through God and because of God that we can have life at all. But that life does not last for ever. We are here only for a season, and when that brief time is over, we return to the dust of the earth from which we came. Lent helps us keep it real by admitting that we are indeed sinful, God bless us! But through God there is forgiveness and mercy. And Lent helps us keep it real that we won't be here forever. The ash on our foreheads is a reminder of both those things: our sinfulness and our mortality.

But like respiration, we have the chance in Lent to let go of the bad stuff in order to take on the good. We have the chance to be filled with God's holy spirit, which the ancient Hebrews called *ruach*, which means God's holy breath. So, take in a deep breath. Hold it. Let all that oxygen get into your lungs, fill your very being with God's natural goodness. Now exhale. Let go of whatever is weighing you down in this very moment. Let it pass out of your body along with the carbon dioxide. Make room for your next breath, filled with life-giving oxygen and with God's holy breath. Amen.

#### Resource

[https://www.preachingtoday.com/holidays-events/holidays/lent/how-to-breathe-in-season-of-lent.html?utm\\_source=Newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=How+to+Breathe+in+the+Season+of+Lent&utm\\_campaign=PT+Marketing+House+-+2-13-2024+-+Lent%2FEaster](https://www.preachingtoday.com/holidays-events/holidays/lent/how-to-breathe-in-season-of-lent.html?utm_source=Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=How+to+Breathe+in+the+Season+of+Lent&utm_campaign=PT+Marketing+House+-+2-13-2024+-+Lent%2FEaster)