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**God(-)Breathed**

2 Timothy 3:10-4:5

I invite you to (and you can close your eyes for a moment as you do this, if you like) take a deep breath, in and out…

“*So YHWH fashioned an earth creature out of the clay of the earth, and blew into its nostrils the breath of life. And the earth creature became a living being. YHWH planted a garden to the east, in Eden – “Land of Pleasure” – and placed in it the earth creature that had been made.”* (Genesis 2:7-8 IB)

Take in another deep breath of life, in and out…

*“So I [Ezekiel] prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. 8 I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. 9 Then [God] said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath:Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath,and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." 10 I prophesied as [God] commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.*

Thus says the Lord God: *“I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD*." (Ezekiel 37:7-10, 14 NRSV)

Take a deep breath, and know that the Lord has spoken and will act…

“*In the evening of that same day, the first day of the week, the doors were locked in the room where the disciples were, for fear of the Temple authorities. Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 20 Having said this, the savior showed them the marks of crucifixion. The disciples were filled with joy when they saw Jesus, who said to them again, "Peace be with you. As Abba God sent me, so I’m sending you." After saying this, Jesus breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit.”* (John 20:19-22 IB)

Take a deep breath, receive the Holy Spirit…

We heard in the 2nd letter to Timothy today, “All scripture is inspired by God”. Our letter writer has coined another phrase here, or actually a single Greek word that turns into the English phrase “inspired by God” in the NRSV. In Greek it’s the adjective “qeo,pneustoj”, or literally God-breathed. The NIV uses that direct translation.

Timothy’s scripture was the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. And his mentor tells him that God has put the breath of life into those scriptures, like the breath of creation in Genesis 2, the breath of resurrection in Ezekiel’s vision, and the breath of the Holy Spirit, the enduring, comforting, advocating presence of the risen Christ in the upper room.

All Scripture is God-breathed. What does that mean to us? We’ve come through some challenging passages in these letters to Timothy and Titus, about women and queer people... And we haven’t even touched on the passages that have easily been quoted to justify slavery throughout history. What does it mean to imagine that words such as those have something to do with the breath of God?

Maybe some of us have come to think of biblical inspiration in a way similar to the character Grace Marks in Margaret Atwood’s historical novel Alias Grace. She says: “The way I understand things, the Bible may have been thought out by God, but it was written down by men. And like everything men write down, such as the newspapers, they got the main story right but some of the details wrong.”

What Grace is pointing to is another way that scripture is full of life, that is, the many lives of those who lived and told and eventually wrote these words on scrolls, in letters. If we balance our zoomed in reading with a zoomed out reading of the Bible, we can see how different writers and worldviews contributed to this library we call the Bible. NT Wright compares just Jeremiah and Paul, for example, and points out how “their own personalities, vocations, struggles and sheer individual circumstances affected deeply the way they saw and said things. The inspiration of the Bible didn’t flatten out individual styles and angles of vision. If anything, it emphasized them.” (*Paul*, 120)

Scripture is full of the lives of the people of God. These pastoral epistles, for example. As we consider what they mean for us, it matters where they came from. Something was going on in those house churches of Ephesus that made Paul and others concerned about proclaiming the message, remembering Jesus Christ risen from the dead, holding to the sincere faith that Lois and Eunice had passed on.

“Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (3:14-15).

And that’s when he writes: “All Scripture is God-breathed”. Our ideas about the nature of Scripture are often one more difference to divide us within the worldwide church. One side accuses another side of not taking the Bible seriously, and with that, there is no more room for conversation, or, I would argue, for Spirit-led discernment.

The notion of Scripture being God-breathed is very serious. Timothy is told to remember the firm beliefs from his childhood. And Timothy (and Paul) come from a tradition that believes that God mucks around in the clay of human existence, not to make a perfect static sculpture garden, but to breathe life into that existence, to put humanity back on our feet when we’ve fallen and to be the very breath that sustains our lives.

The breath of God is creating, redeeming, and sustaining breath. If all Scripture is God-breathed, then our Scripture is full of life, renewed life, eternal life. This is not meant to make us think that each verse of Scripture is an unquestionable, infallible word that is somehow free from historical context and human influence. If we lock scripture down to only ever mean one thing and never teach us something new, that sucks the life right out of it.

All Scripture is God-breathed, so there is life in it for us to wrestle with. The Jewish foundations of Timothy’s faith and practice, which are the foundations of our own, are not a “God said it, I believe it, that settles it” kind of faith. Timothy would have learned from his childhood that Scripture is for wrestling with, especially in community.

Pastor Melissa Florer-Bixler in her book *Fire By Night* writes that “Argumentation is a consistent act in the drama of rabbinic interpretation. A robust debate is par for the course of figuring out the Bible, a wrestling that reminds us of the seriousness and intricacy of Scripture. It was worthy of raised voices and the occasional pounded fist.” (32)

Scripture is God-breathed. It’s not empty, it’s not lifeless, it’s not frozen. It could spring from the mud like something we’ve never seen before, it could move a whole people into a new day, it could come to you in your closed room of fear and uncertain future and speak peace, peace.

Scripture is God-breathed. There is life in that Word. And that is serious business. This letter’s way of saying it is that All Scripture “is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (3:16-17). That’s the aim – to be equipped for every good work.

Scripture wants to do something to us. Or do something with us. Or do something by us. If Scripture is God-breathed, then that life is breathed into we who read, follow, seek to live it. Pastor Meghan Good writes in *The Bible Unwrapped* (and a recent Canadian Mennonite) that “The Bible is more than a story only – it’s a story moving us and the world somewhere. It’s a revelation of who God is, of what God loves, of how the world is shaped. It’s an invitation to a relationship, an apprenticeship in God’s creative, nurturing vocation”.

Walter Brueggemann has written that “The Bible is an act of imagination that is rooted in memory but that presses always toward new possibility that is still in front of us.”

Jesus also knew that there was life in the scriptures. Every time Jesus said “You have heard it said “x” but I say to you “x3”, he was reminding his listeners that the Torah isn’t just a flat rule book, it’s an invitation to discern how God is calling us to live in this moment, and the next moment to come. There’s life in it, Kingdom of God life like a mustard seed that starts tiny and then spreads and really messes up your neatly ordered garden.

We’re never done figuring out what scripture says because we haven’t finished finding new situations and questions to ask God to breathe that creating, redeeming, sustaining breath into. As Rachel Miller Jacobs from AMBS once said, “If Jesus can honour his own religious tradition and build on it (as he did in the Sermon on the Mount), so can we.”

All Scripture is God-breathed. Even the parts that strike us as a bit of a mess have the breath of God within them, the Spirit of God can do something even with them. Melissa Florer-Bixler reflects on her discomfort when visiting an abbey and hearing a passage from Titus about slavery. A bit like the audible reaction here a few weeks ago when we read about women being silent in church.

Some passages in 1 Timothy and Titus would have been included in 19th century volumes like *Selections of the Holy Bible for Negro Slaves*. Books like this conveniently excluded the freedom narrative of the book of Exodus and certainly the many biblical references to it. Reflecting on her squirming feeling of hearing Titus read in worship, Melissa writes, “I’ve come to see that the Bible is a reckoning, where we come face to face with what we have done with the Bible or what the Bible has done to us…Whenever we read the Bible, we participate in a history. In that history are those who have turned the good news into both joy and terror” (27).

All Scripture is God-breathed. That is, the living Spirit of God is always asking something of us when we lift these words of the page. The Bible isn’t a story of everybody doing everything right, otherwise we wouldn’t need Ezekiel’s vision of God’s breath of resurrection. The Bible isn’t a rulebook that has a clear answer for everything we must do, or we wouldn’t need John’s story of Jesus breathing the abiding, guiding Spirit into the tension of the upper room. The Bible isn’t a story where everything has been decided, otherwise, what would the Genesis breath of creation mean?

There is life in these scriptures of ours, life that we need to engage with regularly, not just pull off a dusty shelf when we’re looking for something specific, or wait for Sunday when we hear a little snippet and maybe one person’s efforts to wrestle with it that week.

If we don’t want these words to become frozen on the page or hardened into weapons that we or the most vulnerable among us must defend ourselves against, we need to let the creating, redeeming, and sustaining breath in these scriptures be breathed into us by reading and hearing and studying and praying with wrestling with them each on our own and together.

I have one last long quote that I really wanted to share with you today. This is from the late Clark H. Pinnock who taught theology here at Mac Divinity College, and he wrote this as a contributing editor for Sojourners:

“We tend to make the Bible more authoritarian than it wants to be. Somehow we do not listen when Paul tells his readers that these are his opinions and that they as mature Christians ought to think things through for themselves in the Spirit. He admits that even he knows only "in part" and invites all of us to enter into the process of discerning God's will.

“Let us not forget that the coming of the Spirit is an event as important as the incarnation itself. The Spirit was sent to make the gospel come alive, and the written word a living and powerful sword. The Bible can be little more than a museum of old antiques, but when the Spirit gets hold of it, the inspired information deposited in the text becomes activated in our experience. The Bible in the power of the Spirit is a means of grace whereby the liberating force of Jesus' message can become real in human life today…

“The art of interpreting the Bible (it is not a science) is not something we can do all by ourselves. We will need all the help we can get from readers who have gone before, from Christians studying the Bible in different contexts than ours, and from our brothers and sisters who stand, and more importantly, kneel beside us. Our ability to understand the Bible is as broken and imperfect as all the other things we try to do for God, and yet we can gain strength and truth from it because of the indwelling Spirit testifying to the risen Lord.”

All Scripture is God-breathed. Close your eyes and take a deep breath…

Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer,

Breathe in us

Breathe into these scriptures

Show us the spark of life you give

So that we can wrestle, rejoice, and be comforted

In your written word

And in your living word,

In Jesus Christ.

Amen

Clark Pinnock:

https://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/treasure-earthen-vessels?parent=48371