

Surrender, Breath, and Being Made New [OR Be Gentle with Yourself]

Mark 4:26-34 and 2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17

Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on June 13, 2021

Here's a pro-tip conversation starter: Ask someone about their experience on the roads around the Denver area. It's come up in conversation more in the last couple of weeks than I can remember it before. And that's saying A LOT. Traffic here has long blended rural and city drivers that mix as well as oil and water and makes for good stories. More recently though, driving has inarguably reached wackadoodle proportions.¹ It's like we've entered a video game that we didn't download. Local police twitter (yes, I follow them too) tweets with the latest top speeds, flipped cars, and fatal accidents. I have found myself reacting to the chaos before realizing that I'm also contributing to it. Want to do something counter-cultural? Drive as if you have all the time in the world – except not too slowly or you become a problem on the other end of the spectrum which is a significant part of the chaos too. Anybody else feel themselves ramping up just talking about it?

Let's take a different tack then, shall we? Our bodies are wired in such a way that they can be reminded to respond differently. Intentional breathing can reset our nervous systems and reduce anxiety.² Let's try it together. In just a minute, I'm going to invite you to breathe in for a count of two, hold that breath for a count of three, and breathe out for a count of four. References abound on this kind of breathing with different breath and hold counts but, in the interest of time and everyone's different experiences with this kind of breathing, we're going to stick to the count of breathing in for two, hold for three, out for four. You can close your eyes if you're comfortable doing so. We're going to go through the cycle three times. Ready, close your eyes. Here we go:

Breathe in one-two...

Hold one-two-three...

Breathe out one-two-three-four. [repeat for three times total]

¹ "Wackadoodle" is a more recent addition to the Oxford English Dictionary.

<https://www.bbcamerica.com/anglophenia/2014/03/wackadoodle-makes-oxford-english-dictionary#>

² Seth J. Gillihan, Ph.D. "How to Reduce Anxiety with Every Breath." October 22, 2019.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/think-act-be/201910/how-reduce-anxiety-every-breath>

Okay, you can open your eyes – if I haven't lulled you into sleep, that is. Risky thing for a preacher to do, I suppose. ;)

This relaxed breathing is brought to us, in part, by the Gospel of Mark. Mark generally moves at an intense pace with lots of “immediately” this and “immediately” that.³ But today, the pace slows down. Dare I say that it's even gentle. The Markan community was confronted by the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and what action they should take to get along in the world.⁴ They had two obvious options. Should they take up arms and join a revolution? Or should they go along with Roman authority to get along and live another day? The Gospel of Mark offers a third response to the crisis of the day – to follow Jesus in the self-giving way of the cross, to trust God's faithfulness, and to recognize God's promises taking “a dramatic and subversive turn in Jesus.”⁵

Mark's urgency and crisis response takes a pause in our two parables today, telling us stories about how the Kingdom of God expands by God's power and not our own. We have the parable of the growing seed that sprouts and grows without us needing to know how – “first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.” And then the parable of the mustard seed that is the tiniest of seeds, producing the greatest of all shrubs and providing shade for the birds. In these stories, we're reminded that the Kingdom of God is first an act of God. We strategize ideas and take action on them hoping that we're on the right track, but God's kingdom *will* grow. We don't know how. This is Mark's version of taking a deep breath, easing the urgency caused by the crisis to remember the main thing. Breathe in. Hold. Breathe out.

There's almost no day that goes by without someone wondering with me about what they “should be doing” or how they think they should be “handling it.” Heck, I wonder about these things for myself, too. It doesn't even matter what “it” is. It could be intense personal grief. Or a changing job situation. Or financial difficulty. Or emerging from pandemic ready for normal and not finding it. Quite often, I

³ This is a fun article comparing the use of “immediately” across the New Testament, the gospels, and Mark in particular. <https://livingroomtheology.com/immediately-used-much-gospel-mark/>

⁴ Matthew L. Skinner, Professor of New Testament, Luther Seminary, MN. Sermon Brainwave Podcast for June 13, 2021. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/788-third-sunday-after-pentecost-ord-11b-june-13-2021>

⁵ Ibid.

find myself saying things like, “give yourself some grace” or “be gentle with yourself.” I know from personal experience that this is easier said than done. But when I hear people say it to me, I find it easier to remember that I’m only human. And when I say it to other people, I’m reminded that they are too. Each breath connecting us to every other fragile, wondrous, vulnerable, and impatient creature.

Which brings us to the new creation promised in the second Corinthians reading. My lord, what promise! “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”⁶ Immediate deliverance. No waiting. New! This baptismal reality in Christ is like the growing seed in the parable – first the stalk, then the head, then the new grain in the head. We do not know how.

You are simply new. Not a romanticized, perfect new version of yourself, though. You are a new through a cross. Through THE cross. You are no longer living for yourself but for the one who died and was raised for you. The one who loves so deeply with divine love that this love changes everything, even you. Unconditional love that accepts you for who you are is freedom to surrender to that love and become what you have received from Christ.

Being the body of Christ means that we are death and resurrection people, coaching and encouraging each other, celebrating and grieving with each other. New. New means that there is something old, something former, and something to let go. Letting go creates space. Letting go gives us space to breathe. To abandon our illusion of control. To slow down our thinking in an anxious time in the world. To acknowledge our gifts and run with them. To acknowledge our sins against self and others and reconcile across them.

Letting go surrenders us to the one who loves so deeply with divine love that we are changed, made new – “first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.” We do not know how. For this and for all that God is doing, we can say thanks be to God. And Amen.

⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:17