

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

Imagine for a moment that God were breathing. In and out, inhale and exhale, creating a wind which, sometimes gently, sometimes not so gently, swirled across the landscape, moving like the tidal ebbing and flowing, reliable and yet surprising. Imagine that by inhaling, God draws us closer into divine relationship, and then just as forcefully exhales miracles, spreading miraculous opportunities back into our world along with us. This might be one way to imagine the work of God's Holy Spirit, God's own breath of life. The Spirit's work is ongoing, uninterrupted day and night, with both purpose and aptitude, to achieve God's creative dream. Imagine that we were able to feel God's breath caressing our cheeks and rustling our hair comforting, inspiring, and invigorating us for our daily pilgrimage. As God inhales us inward, we receive our daily dose of divine love, and as God exhales, all our daily cares and preoccupations, our obsessions and our personal dramas are blown away, leaving us with love alone to guide our way, both night and day, to be that pilgrim.

For these first few weeks of the Pentecost season, we are treated to some selections of Paul's Letter to the Galatians. Paul, tacitly endorsed by the Apostles in Jerusalem, some of them former disciples of Jesus himself, was an enthusiastic and determined missionary who sought to spread the Good News of Christ and the gift of God's Spirit throughout the eastern Mediterranean region. On his various mission trips, he preached a new theology to diverse populations and founded churches as he went. These letters which have survived as part of our New Testament, were the way he kept in contact with these churches as his mission journeys led him on to new regions. They were meant to encourage the new Christians, to remind them of what they had learned and experienced, and to assure them that Paul still held them in his prayers even in his absence.

Most of these populations were not Jewish. But Paul understood Jesus' message to be one for all people. In those early years, not all the Apostles agreed with him. Many thought that since Jesus was Jewish himself, and that since the Good News was first preached to the people of Judea, non-Jews who wanted to follow the Christian way ought to be required to first demonstrate their allegiance by following Jewish laws. Paul was Jewish himself, and knew what it meant to be a devout participant in that religion. But he hung his heart on the belief that the Christian message was a universal departure from Jewish traditions and laws. His theology was that while the foundational relationship with God to which Jewish faith was a witness was absolutely important, the customs and regulations which had developed over centuries were not. He believed that Christ Jesus had proclaimed a New Covenant between God and humankind, one which expanded the religious life of all people, including Jews of course, and extended it to all ethnicities.

Galatia, an area in southern Turkey, was not known for large cosmopolitan cities. The villages there appear to have been more rural, and let's say, unpretentious. But Paul had come to love these people and the ministries he had with them, and by the time he chose to continue his missionary journey to other regions, he was confident that God's Spirit of new birth had taken seed among his new friends, and would grow to be a faithful and joyful garden. But by the evidence of this letter, written some months after his departure, new missionaries had come to the Galatians with a contradictory message. Paul hadn't given them the whole story, they said. The new Christians would need to follow the example of Abraham and become circumcised. They would need to follow the Jewish dietary laws. They would need to observe the Sabbath as required by the laws, and by all these mandates and more prove their worthiness to be in covenant with God. The Galatians were surprised and distressed and blind-sided by these new requirements. Paul, having heard about this, was furious. He can hardly contain himself while he is writing this letter. Our reading from this epistle, and others we have had this month, kindly skip over some of his expletives. Notice that today's reading skips

from verse 1 to verse 13. In verse 12, Paul vents his frustration by writing: “I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves! (exclamation point)”

Oh, pity those poor Galatians! Caught in the middle of a contentious religious dispute! What might they have thought? We have no historical record to tell us about how their particular quandary sorted itself out, but I hope that they found Paul’s letter persuasive. For he writes about how God’s Spirit can set us free, free from not only the yoke of unnecessary and divisive customs, but also from habits and proclivities which may enslave us to destructive behaviors and attitudes. Idolatry, jealousy, strife, anger, arrogance, addiction, abuse and such things imprison our souls and bodies, and as their slaves we may be deterred from those wonderful dreams God has for our lives. When James and John want to take revenge on the Samaritan city in our Gospel reading from today, Jesus rebukes them from such an enslaving resentment. To be a disciple, such things must be set aside; all those confining things which seem so natural to us, even those comfortable things which make us too complacent, like foxes in their holes or birds in their nests, need to be set aside if we are to follow Jesus on his way, on the road to Jerusalem. We need to be free of them if we are to grow in God’s garden. This is the message Paul has for the Galatian churches: enslavement to the customs of the past, whether institutional or personal, is neither necessary nor helpful for new life to flourish.

Oh, pity the poor Galatians, caught in the crossfire of controversy! Receiving mixed messages from those who have come to them with Christ’s message. Confused by so-called expert missionaries, whom should they believe? Who has the true message; who has the true authority? And what of those other missionaries who have followed Paul to this rural region and contradicted his teaching? Were they deliberately disrespecting Paul? Had they come with some sort of animosity for Paul, trying to publicly discredit him? Were they willing to endure the hardships of life on the missionary road in a foreign backwater out of envy at his success? Not likely. It’s more likely that they truly believed in the integrity of their opposition and were, in fact, saving those poor, unsophisticated Galatians from the heresy of Paul’s teaching, lest they be led down an incorrect path of discipleship. There is no evidence that their motives were malicious; they appear to have just thought that they knew Jesus’ intentions more clearly than Paul. Perhaps instead of lecturing the poor Galatians in letters like this, it would have been better that Paul use his arguments on his fellow Christians back in Jerusalem. And he probably did, for we have reports in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles which place Paul there in council with the others, making his case that Gentile converts not be subject to the old Jewish laws.

Paul’s controversial message to the Galatians, as he writes in what we have read today, is to live in the Spirit and to be led by the Spirit. That Spirit is God’s own Spirit, God’s own breathe of life, which keeps us and sustains us and enables us to live out God’s dreams. Paul is actually sharing Jesus’ message in the best ways he knows how, for it is perhaps the most significant promise of Jesus that we can have access to God’s Spirit, that we can have a relationship with the Spirit, that God intends for us to have that relationship, and that it will last forever, as God breathes in and out, restoring our supply of love and distributing it through miraculous effects. When we receive the gift of that loving Spirit, in all aspects of our lives: in our labors and in our recreation, in our marriages and in our parenting, in our personal and in our community affairs, then our gardens flourish with good fruit. Paul famously enumerates the kind of fruits such gardens will yield: joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, and so on. And is there a trick to achieving this bountiful yield? Is there some pre-requisite to being freed from our addictions, our obsessions, and all our personal dramas? Perhaps only this: Let them go. Take a deep breath yourself, a restorative pause, and then let them go. As you are being inhaled into God’s kingdom of love, release yourself from thinking that you are the center of the universe. Receive that blessed freedom. And then, as God exhales you back into your world, share that love, the loving Spirit of God, without prejudicial qualification, with patience and kindness, encouraging others to feel the wind in their hair and the sun at their backs. We are all pilgrims together, and God’s own breath can sweep the obstacles from our path. Amen