

Holy Breathing, Sacred Breath

(Luke 2:1-20)

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
Christmas Day, December 25, 2019

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our creator, our sustainer and our redeemer. Amen.

Recently I have come to view the passage we just heard from Luke as a 20-verse **breath**. Just as you and I inhale and exhale in every minute of our lives, this section of the Gospel – from the first words announcing the decree from Augustus to the last words recounting the shepherds' journey from Bethlehem as they returned to their flocks – strikes me with the feeling that the **entire world** has **taken a breath**.

Joseph has followed the instruction to go Bethlehem, his ancestral home, to be counted in the first Judean census, and he has taken his pregnant wife Mary with him. Once there, they discover they are too late to find lodging. This was after all a census of the entire region, and there were undoubtedly many families from many villages and settlements crowded into a town that by some estimates usually only had a population of about 300 in normal circumstances. Imagine a census has been called for all of Clarke County, and everyone was required to travel to Millwood to be counted. Rooms and lodging would certainly be at a premium!

So among the many people who have come to Bethlehem and with no room available to them, Joseph and his young wife find themselves in unexpected surroundings ... a cave near the town, perhaps. It is in that place that this young pregnant girl gives birth to a child ... a child from outside of time ... a child whose coming was shared in the words of an archangel ... a child who will change the world. But before those miraculous events many years down the road, in **that moment** and in **that place**, we simply find a tired mother, a watchful father, and a newborn infant swaddled in cloth and lying in the stillness.

Inhale.

Then the scene shifts to the fields where shepherds are standing guard over their flocks. It is silent. It is dark. There is **nothing** to indicate **anything different** in the world. Then, angels ... first, a single visitor, a solitary messenger sharing news with the stunned shepherds that on that night and in a town not far away, the Savior of the world has been born. In a flash, the heavens suddenly contain a multitude of angels, appearing so rapidly and in such great numbers that the sky is soon ablaze with light and filled with a tremendously loud and almost indescribable sound – a chorus of celebration and praise. In the face of this appearance, the startled, frightened shepherds are silent. What started as an uneventful night surrounded by their flocks is now a moment when this group knows **deep inside** that things will never again be the same.

Hold the breath.

We then have our final scene. The shepherds have come with great haste to see the child, and to share with Mary and Joseph all they had witnessed in the darkened, quiet fields that had in the span of the slimmest of moments been illuminated with light and filled with sound. There would have been excited conversation ... and gasps of amazement ... and questions. The place where the child lay would be filled with the noise of excited chattering. Then, the noise would have gradually died down as the shepherds took their leave and returned to the fields, singing songs of praise for the gift they had witnessed. In the end of this passage, Mary would have been left with Joseph and the child, and the thoughts and feelings that she pondered, and held close to her heart ... and treasured. Finally, silence.

Exhale.

In Hebrew, there is a word for breath: *ruach*. But there's also a second meaning: spirit. Both, I think, can be applied to this scene from Luke. Yes, there is the breath of each person we encounter in the narrative ... Mary and Joseph, and the child, and the shepherds. There is the cyclical nature of breath that I see in the story arc.

But I believe the alternate meaning applies. Woven throughout ... in the actions of the shepherds and the appearance of the angels ... in the journey of the parents and the pondering in Mary's heart ... is the **spirit of God**. Two thousand years later, the spirit is still moving ... moving through our lives. The **breath** of God fills our lungs and sustains our life; the **spirit** of God fills our souls and guides our journeys.

My prayer for you on this Christmas morning and throughout the year is that you discern and live sustained by the breath of life. Embrace the wonderful moments when you are called to inhale. Hold your breath in moments of wonder ... moments of sadness ... and especially moments of joy. And when the time comes to reflect on how God has worked in your lives, exhale ... pause ... treasure those moments ... ponder them in your heart.

And breathe once again.