



Sunset on the Serengeti September 21

We Are Pilgrims On A Journey May 19, 2024 Pentecost

Barbara Brown Taylor begins her sermon “The Gospel of the Holy Spirit” Pentecost sermon with a question and a reflection:

Did you know the word “conspire” means to breathe together? Take a breath. Now blow it out again. There! You have just launched a conspiracy. You can hear the word “spirit” in there too – to conspire – to be filled with the same spirit, to be enlivened by the same wind...

What happens between us when we come together to worship God is that the Holy Spirit swoops in and out among us, knitting us together through the songs we sing, the prayers we pray, the breaths we breathe.

She continues:

Now take another breath. If you have studied earth science, then you know that our gorgeous blue-green planet is wrapped in a protective veil we call the atmosphere, which separates the air we breathe from the cold vacuum of outer space. Beneath this veil is all the air that ever was. No cosmic planet-cleaning company comes along every hundred years or so to suck out all the old air and pump in some new.

The same ancient air just keeps recirculating, which means that every time any of us breathes we breathe star dust left over from the creation of the earth. We breathe brontosaurus breath and pterodactyl breath. We breathe air that has circulated through the rain forests of Kenya and air that has turned yellow with sulfur over Mexico City. We breathe the same air that Plato breathed, and Mozart and Michelangelo, not to mention Hitler...

Every time we breathe, we take in what was once some baby’s first breath, or some dying person’s last. We take it in, we use it to live, and when we breathe out it carries some of us with it into the next person, or tree, or blue-tailed skink, who uses it to live.

This is why we breath together at the beginning of our service. To settle in, to invite the Spirit to swoop in and knit us together, to remember our place in the grand Mystery of the Cosmos, and to launch a conspiracy of community, and love, no matter who or what we are.

This for me, is Pentecost. It's all about Ruach, the terrifying, powerful, gentle, sweet creating Spirit that links us together in time and space. It's about the Sacred Ruach that inspires, that lights the fires of connection and wonder and the wild and unruly nature of hope.

Barbara Brown imagines that first Pentecost like this:

There they were, about a hundred and twenty of them, Luke says, all moping around wondering what they were going to do without Jesus, when they heard a holy hurricane headed their way. Before any of them could defend themselves, that mighty wind had blown through the entire house, striking sparks that burst into flames above their heads, and they were filled up with it – every one of them was filled to the gills with God's own breath....

Before the day was over, the church had grown from one hundred twenty to more than three thousand. Shy people had become bold, scared people had become gutsy, and lost people had found a sure sense of direction. Disciples who had not believed themselves capable of tying their own sandals without Jesus discovered abilities within themselves they never knew they had. When they opened their mouths to speak, they sounded like Jesus. When they laid their hands upon the sick, it was as if Jesus himself had touched them. In short order, they were doing things they had never seen anyone but him do, and there was no explanation for it, except that they had dared to inhale on the day of Pentecost. They had sucked in God's own breath and they had been transformed by it."

They dared to inhale...

On this Pentecost, for us, as pastor and congregation,
We are being invited to inhale
as we settle ourselves at the trailhead of a three month sabbatical around the theme of Pilgrimage.

As most of you know, we were awarded a Clergy Renewal Grant from the Lilly foundation to help fund this sabbatical. The whole purpose of the funding is to help congregations and pastors see sabbatical as shared experience~~rather than the pastor disappearing to Costa Rica for a long three month nap while the congregation takes its own snooze from the life of the spirit, coasting until the pastor returns. This is why we chose the idea of Pilgrimage for our shared sabbatical time. It's such a creative way of thinking about being church, about being sojourners, about the inner and outer life of faith and spirituality.

Richard Rohr says that a pilgrimage is an outward prayer that calls us inward to the divine.

One of the application questions in the grant asked why it was a good time for sabbatical for the pastor and congregation. This is what I wrote:

[At FCCH} we believe the sacred journey is our home. This justice-driven, spaciouly welcoming congregation was tested by the trauma of the pandemic and unexpected shifts in our congregation. Our post-pandemic time as pastor and people has been one of recommitment and restoration with caring trust, imagination, and deep faith.

In many ways, it feels like we are standing at a trailhead, beckoned by Spirit into an eighth day of creation—the day when humans and God co-create in a new world. Before we travel that particular trail, it will be wonderful for us to experience pilgrimage in as many ways as possible. It is essential, as well as a gift, for all of us to set aside this spiritual space and time of pilgrimage in tandem as a community and as a spiritual leader.

Both Mark and I are so excited about the paths stemming from the trailhead for your congregational pilgrimage: (peruse the flyer insert).
(Walks! Movies! Stories! Bookgroup! THE PREACHERS!)

My pilgrimage begins tomorrow with spending time with my beloved wife, Liz. We fly to California tomorrow and get to spend a week traveling down highway 1. We have hotel reservations and no itinerary. We can't wait. We will end up in Laguna Beach, to enjoy time with my sister and her husband. Liz will then fly back to North Carolina, and then I get to set out on my own for a week of CAR camping at CAMPGROUNDS. (What could go wrong when I am all by myself?) When I return in June, I have several weeks of uninterrupted time of play, art, writing, music, staring into space, petting my cats, kayaking, building up my paddleboarding skills. Near the end of July, Liz and I will go to Amsterdam for a few days, and then go on an inn to inn hiking spree in the Swiss Alps. On returning home, a few more weeks of just being open to whatever and however the Spirit sends surprises.

Mark asked me what are my hopes for this pilgrimage-sabbatical time. I am not really sure, but what I told the Lilly People is this:

it is a good time for me personally to be on sabbatical, and to live it through the lens of pilgrimage. The last five years have been a tumultuous ride through challenge, joy, grief, and growth—personally and professionally. I have learned in painful ways how to face Fear, and I have been surprised over and over at the deep well of Love that protects my heart and soul. To perceive my renewal as pilgrimage will offer me space for reflection and wonder. My plans do not seek a traditional pilgrimage site, rather, it's a journey designed to mirror life—the undulating roll of going forth, and return; of journey outward, journey inward; of novel and familiar. While I will not seek a shining destination, my hope is to know even more clearly the sacred journey as my home.

I think, in the end, I want to be more like the disciples on Pentecost. I want to dare to inhale more frequently, I want to suck in God's breath and be transformed by it. I want to stand at the trailhead, and relish that that the journey is my home.

I want this for all of us.

The hutzpah to dare to inhale....

To have full throttle experiences of Ruach t
hat might be subtle and shimmering,
wild and lonely,
jaw-dropping amazing,
and silent night peaceful.

Friends,

We begin today.

We are pilgrims on a journey.

I am so grateful to be traveling,
in tandem,
with you.

Amen.

Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Gospel of the Holy Spirit, from Home by Another Way*,
Boston: Cowley Publications, 1999, 142-46