

Pentecost 2017
St. Mary Catholic Church
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He came skating toward me at full speed. He lowered his right shoulder, and ran into me with full force. I hit the boards. My stick went into the air, and I landed on the ice, flat on my back. I think I saw stars.

And then – I couldn't breathe.

My mind was telling my abdominal muscles to do what they always do – “move in and out!” – but nothing happened. I could not breathe. Or, as the doctor later said, “You got the wind knocked out of you!”

We've all had those moments when we cannot breathe. It's frightening, isn't it? A wave comes along, knocks you hard onto the bottom of the sand. You can't breathe, and you're under the salt water. It's scary.

Playing football, or soccer, or a dozen other sports- you get hit hard, and it takes your breath away. You're learning to swim, and you suck some pool water into your mouth. You can't breathe.

There are moments in life when we can't breathe. Your 18 year old son has just died in an accident, and you stand holding on to someone in the hospital hallway, crying so hard, that you can't breathe at all. Your spouse of many years says, “I love someone else,” and you can't catch your breath. You bury your mother, and you stand by the grave, gasping for air.

You hear news about Christians in Egypt being shot – the newest Christian martyrs. Terrorist attacks in England or the Philippines. A police officer loses his life in Richmond. A political situation that seems swirling out of control.

There are *many* things that ‘take our breath away.’ And in those frightening moments, the one thing we know is – *I need my next breath.*

But there are *other* things in life which ‘take our breath away.’ Positive things. You stand at the rim of the Grand Canyon, and the majesty of God's creation touches you to the core. You turn to your friend and say, “Isn't this breathtaking?”

The nurse hands you your firstborn child, and you cradle that baby in your arms. A love more powerful than anything you've ever felt wells up inside you, and your heart is racing, and you

can't breathe because of the miracle that you're holding.

Or you're eyes meet the eyes of the person you love most in the world, and you have to catch your breath.

Or the groom who stands at the altar, crying as he sees the bride come down the aisle. He is so happy... and I have to whisper to him, "Take a breath," and he responds, "And also with you."

Or we see someone doing the right thing, doing what is just and good and generous. And we are uplifted and encouraged.

These joyful moments take our breath away too, and if we are going to be able to thank God for them, we realize – *I need my next breath.*

That first generation of Christians had the wind knocked out of them. The death of Jesus left them flat on their backs, unable to breathe. Jesus' love, and message, and example had been so overwhelmingly wonderful! But he was killed. He was gone. And that gasping, tiny community of disciples had no idea how to go on.

So what did Jesus do? In today's Gospel, he makes his way through the locked doors of their fears, and says "Peace be with you." And then, John's Gospel says – "he breathed on them." That's right – he 'breathed on them,' and said to them, "receive the Holy Spirit."

The death of Jesus had left them unsure of how to go on. So he gave them his breath, his spirit, his power, his life. And his love made it possible for them to catch their breath, and go on!

What did Jesus do? The Acts of the Apostles tells us that those baffled, gasping Christians were in Jerusalem...waiting. Perhaps they felt like I did, as I lay on the ice, waiting for my lungs to start working again. Where would their next breath come from? Where would *hope* come from? Without Jesus to lead them, where would *strength* come from?

And what does God do? God sends the Holy Spirit upon them, and they are able to live again, and breathe again! The Spirit, that is, the breath of God, gives them the ability on that first Pentecost Day to break down walls of division, to overcome fear, to love without measure, to serve as Jesus served, and to proclaim just how good, and beautiful, and amazing are the works of the Lord!

Whenever the Scriptures talk about the spirit of God, they use the word 'pneuma.' That word does not just mean 'spirit,' it also means 'breath' and 'wind' and 'soul.'

When we hear about God sending his Spirit upon that first generation of Christians, the Scriptures are telling us that God sent his breath, his life, his strength, into that rag tag group of Jesus' friends, who had had the wind knocked out of them by the crucifixion. Life had knocked them down – God breathed healing into them, and they could stand, and serve.

On THIS Pentecost day, the risen Christ is ready, again, to help us breathe, again. He's ready to make his way into the locked parts of our lives, to stand in our midst, and say, "Peace be with you."

What has knocked the wind out of you recently? What sad and terrible thing makes you gasp? What tragedy takes your breath away? What part of you feels lifeless? What has happened that leaves you feeling like you've just been checked in to the boards, leaving you flat on your back? What has hit you so hard that you are saying, "I don't know how to go forward?"

In that moment, the one thing you know is this – how much you need God.

And, in every one of those situations, the Risen One comes, and breathes *HIS* life into *our* lives. He breathes *HIS* power into *our* weakness. He breathes *HIS* healing into *our* brokenness. He pours his peace over our pain, his hope into our fearfulness. The Holy Spirit IS God's own life and vitality – and that Spirit will enable you to live, even those parts of you that feel numb, and dead.

Sit quietly this week – you'll feel the breeze of the Holy Spirit upon your face. Be still this week – you'll sense the breath of God at work in you. Pray directly this week – the Holy Spirit will calm your fears. Read the scriptures, receive the sacraments, treasure your family members and neighbors – in all of this, God's own breath will fill your lungs.

And when that happens, you will be commissioned, as the early Christians were, to get up, stand up, start up, move up, and speak up – telling others about the ways that God has breathed new life into you. Since Christ's breath is alive in you, then you will be sent to speak his word, and do his work, and love his people, and sense his presence, in every nook and cranny of his creation.

If we learn to pay attention, we will discover that every moment of every day has the potential to reveal God's beauty. And if you're not careful, you may end up turning to your friends again and again, pointing to God's presence, and saying, "Isn't life breathtaking?"