

Breath of God

An Advent Devotional

Chapel in the Pines Presbyterian Church
December 1 – December 24, 2024



And the breath of God gives me life.
– Job 33:4



written by Andrew Taylor-Troutman

We cannot be brave without our breath.

– Rabbi Sharon Brous

Introduction

... *and believe the gospel.* Mark 1:15

A couple of months ago, one of our elders was teaching young disciples a song that included the word "gospel" in the lyrics. Using this as a teaching opportunity, she asked the group what the word "gospel" meant. Silence.

Finally, a child raised a hand. "I think I've heard of a gospel in church!"

The young disciple is exactly right. Furthermore, the gospel, often known as the "good news of Jesus Christ," surpasses all human institutions, whether religious, political, secular, or sacred, in terms of size, depth, breadth, wisdom, and wonder. The gospel is as real and as close as your breath.

For this reason, each daily devotional includes a snippet of scripture, my brief reflection, and also a breath prayer—a word or phrase for you to think as you deeply inhale, then another as you slowly exhale. Prayer and breathe as many times as you like. As Cole Artur Riley wrote, "I've found this practice to be restorative as it grounds me in my body and reintegrates my flesh, mind, and soul daily." May it be so.

Above all, I pray that you, as a child of God, will know the good news of the gospel just like your own breath—a comforting, sustaining, and life-giving force.

INHALE: Gospel grace

EXHALE: Gospel peace

Andrew Taylor-Troutman
November 2024



DAY 1

The days are surely coming, says the Lord... Jeremiah 33:14

Here we are on the first day. Perhaps you're eager for the good news prophecy in the rest of the verse! Why did I stop?!

I invite you to linger here on the first day of Advent—a word that means “coming toward” and necessitates waiting. I invite you to ponder the extravagance of grace that the Maker of heaven and earth and all that is would care at all about a tiny green and blue dot in the vastness of time and space, yet alone offer promises to featherless, two-legged creatures who, for all our genius, will one day be the culinary delight of earthworms. For all mortals, those days are surely coming! We are made of dust, and to dust we shall return.

This day, I invite you to linger, ponder, and reflect on the thought: What a wonder that we have been created.

INHALE: I have life

EXHALE: What a gift

DAY 2

Make me know your ways, O Lord ... Psalm 25:4

The phrase "make me know" is intriguing, as we often associate knowledge with hard work and effort.

The psalm reflects a Hebrew verb tense (*hiphil*) that expresses causation—the subject causes the verb to happen to the subject. In this case, the Lord causes humans to gain knowledge.

It strikes me that I might not choose to learn certain lessons; perhaps they would be too painful or challenging. Maybe I am quite comfortable with what I know and the worldview that supports it.

So, this prayer found in Psalm 25:4 reflects yet another holy prayer that was offered many years later on a terrible night in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Not my will, but thy will be done.”

INHALE: Teach me, God

EXHALE: Thy will be done

DAY 3

Do not remember the sins of my youth... Psalm 25:7

This sounds like an anxious prayer from someone who is deeply aware of their past sins! This hope is also a decent start at repentance as opposed to the country lyric, “I’m old enough to know better, but still too young to care!”

Rather than denying the idea that our sins are laid bare before the throne in heaven, we would be more faithful, like this psalmist, to recall “all the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful” (Psalm 25:10). Or, in the words of the amazing Dolly Parton, believe the Lord says to you, “I want you to know you can always depend on promises made and love without end.”

INHALE: Forgive me, God

EXHALE: Love without end

DAY 4

How can we thank God enough? 1 Thessalonians 3:9

What a piercing question! Today, no matter where you are, there were thousands of tiny graces and gifts—uncontrollable events that nonetheless nourished and sustained you in ways beyond your comprehension. For example, your heart continued to beat without your conscious effort. You don't even have to notice it. What else do we overlook? What else do we take for granted? How can we thank God enough?

Later in this letter, the Apostle Paul instructs us to *rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks continually* (1 Thessalonians 5:16). Though I am far from capable of following these instructions, they remind me of Pema Chödrön, a Buddhist nun, who said, "Be smiling with your eyes full of tears all the time."

INHALE: Thank you

EXHALE: I am enough



DAY 5

May God strengthen your hearts in holiness. 1 Thessalonians 3:13

I love etymology, or the study of the history of a word. The original meaning of the Greek word "strengthen" was to plant a tent peg into the ground. It refers to an action that ensures a secure hold. The point is that the object will remain in place. What does that mean about our hearts and holiness?

The busyness of any season, especially the commercialism of Christmas, can easily overwhelm us, perhaps causing us to lose our footing, if not our peace of mind. It takes prayerful attention to remain anchored in the promise of Advent that the greatest gift cannot be bought by money or achieved by human effort—*unto us a son is given.*

INHALE: Strengthen my faith

EXHALE: Faith is a gift

DAY 6

[Jesus said] *Look at the fig tree and all the trees...* Luke 21:29

Jesus taught by directing the attention of his disciples to the everyday, so-called ordinary things around them, like salt, seeds, and trees. Poet David Wagoner writes, “Stand still. The trees ahead and beside you are not lost.” You can find rooted wisdom right where you are. Being present in place is a gift. Even if you plan to travel this holiday season, you can always strive to stay rooted in God.

I recall a mission trip to Charlotte with the youth group this fall. One of the leaders welcomed us with a devotional that included this scripture: *The place where you are standing is holy ground* (Exodus 3:5). Then, she had us put both feet on the ground and take several deep breaths.

INHALE: I am here

EXHALE: God is with me

DAY 7

[Jesus said] *My words will not pass away.* Luke 21:33

Perhaps Jesus meant that he is eternal, the Living Word in whom all things came into being (see John 1).

Every writer hopes their words will be remembered to change someone's life, not for their own sake. One of my favorite aspects of preaching is when someone says after the sermon, "I loved it how you said this!" The truth is, that wasn't what I said! But the Living Word took on a life of its own in the person's imagination.

We will read on Christmas Eve that Mary, the mother of Jesus, treasured and pondered the things said about her newborn. If we do the same, Jesus will remain with us.

INHALE: You are the Living Word

EXHALE: Abide with me

DAY 8

The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight...

Malachi 3:1

Malachi means “my messenger” in Hebrew, and this book of the Bible announces that another messenger will *prepare the way of the Lord*.

I’m thinking of the word “delight” (Hebrew: *chaphets*), which connotes bending down to inspect something. My youngest child delights in many things on the ground, which makes it difficult to get anywhere in a hurry. She will stop and inspect a leaf, beetle, or rock. She calls the latter “crystals,” even though they look like plain old gravel to me.

Perhaps the message to bend down and give attention to small things and young people is often what I need to hear.

Humberto Ak’abal, a Guatemalan poet, put it this way: “As the years pass, we make ourselves into children.”

INHALE: Slow down

EXHALE: Find delight

DAY 9

The One who began a good work in you will continue to complete it. Philippians 1:16

Advent is a paradox. We celebrate the coming of Jesus Christ over 2,000 years ago, as well as the promise of his return at some point in the future. We look both backward and forward. As Paul wrote to the Philippians, this "good work" has begun, and it still must be completed.

Maggie Smith, the poet and not the dame, observed that there are "so many hours between the day receding and what we recognize as morning." When dawn arrives, the sunlight gradually turns to full daylight. Similarly, we exist in a time that is both already and yet to come.

But here is the promise: though there is still a future to look forward to, Christ is always with us, here and now (Matthew 28:20).

INHALE: God is with me

EXHALE: Always with me

DAY 10

... *with the tender affection of Christ Jesus.* Philippians 1:7

I believe that "compassion" is a more accurate translation of the word "affection." When our Wednesday evening Bible group studied Philippians, I made the point that compassion involves movement from pity to action. This is what Christ modeled for us. The compassionate act may be as seemingly small as giving someone a drink of water, yet Christ promised that, whenever we did such a thing for someone in need, we also had done it for him (Matthew 25:35 and following).

I recently told a story to a parishioner about a woman who invited a homeless man to live in her garage apartment. Eventually, he was able to save enough for his own place. This is a remarkable story, and yet few of us would act with that kind of compassion, right? This parishioner, however, later told me that she saw an unsheltered man pushing a shopping cart overflowing with trash bags stuffed with aluminum cans. When the cart overturned on the curb, she stopped and helped him collect the cans and refill his cart. It was something. Do something.

INHALE: Christ loves me

EXHALE: I can love others



DAY 11

Preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins... Luke 3:3

John is known as the Baptizer for obvious reasons. Yet his ministry was in deed and word—proclaiming repentance. In Greek, repentance (*metanoia*) means “change the mind,” and perhaps that’s part of it. If I have a different perspective, I might decide to act differently.

But I’m reminded of Paul’s confession: *I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do* (Romans 7:15). I can relate! Haven’t even the most disciplined among us found our wills to be weak?

Here’s some good news: repentance can also mean “turning,” as in turning toward God. As symbolized by the waters of baptism, the Fount of Every Blessing forgives us.

INHALE: Turn to God

EXHALE: Be forgiven

DAY 12

All flesh shall see the salvation of God. Luke 3:6

This New Testament verse is a quotation from the prophet Isaiah. It interests me that the New Revised Standard Version follows the King James translation with “flesh” as opposed to other modern versions that have “all people.” Flesh more closely follows the Greek *sarx*, which is itself a translation of the Hebrew *basar*. What’s the significance?

Flesh is bodily.

Many Westerners think of salvation or the afterlife as a disembodied reality, some kind of spiritual realm of light and clouds. This notion does not align with the biblical concept of the resurrection of the body, which refers to the flesh. The flesh displays the scars from the cross and the wounds from the spear.

All flesh shall see—“see” what, exactly? *In the twinkling of an eye, the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed* (1 Corinthians 15:52). So, I like to imagine the Risen Christ not only with the marks of the crucifixion but the twinkle in his eyes.

INHALE: Come, Lord Jesus

EXHALE: Show yourself

DAY 13

At that time, I will bring you home. Zephaniah 3:20

Zephaniah lived and prophesied in Jerusalem toward the end of the seventh century. Previous kings had worshipped foreign gods, like Baal, and Zephaniah foretold doom and destruction on account of this idol worship.

Yet, his name means “wait on the Lord.” This message is ideal for Advent, as we anticipate the arrival of the Lord. Zephaniah also predicted a messianic age of peace (*shalom*). While we are still waiting more than 2,500 years later, we can likewise stay watchful and vigilant, guarding against worshipping the wrong things.

We can also hold in mind Zephaniah’s promise of homecoming as less of a specific place and more of a state of mind—a mind of *shalom*. Mary Oliver describes “home” as where you can say to yourself, “Let me always be who I am and then some.” There’s another perfect message for Advent.

INHALE: Peace of mind

EXHALE: Peace on Earth

DAY 14

With joy, you will draw water from the wells of salvation.
Isaiah 12:3

Aha moment! Picture Jesus at the well with the Samaritan woman (John 4). This woman initially thought that Jesus was talking about drinking water, yet she learned that he offered “living water” like Isaiah’s vision of “the wells of salvation.” In the ancient world, the well was the town’s social center, a place where people gathered for conversation and, most likely, a fair amount of gossip, too. The Samaritan woman was likely a victim of that mean-spirited talk.

What are the places in your community where you encounter people on a regular basis? What are the judgments that you make of those people? Like the cultural differences between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, our culture has its own barriers between gender, class, religion, and race. Imagine if you put aside those judgments. What joy might you discover that would refresh your soul like a cold, clear drink?

INHALE: God fill me

EXHALE: God use me

DAY 15

The Lord is near. Philippians 4:5

With this verse, we encounter the paradox of Advent's "both/and message" yet again. We might think of God's nearness as temporal; God is coming soon to establish a new heaven and new earth (Revelation 21). And the nearness of God is likewise spatial; God is near to our hearts and minds, especially when we grieve and sorrow.

Niels Bohr, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist, once mused, "The opposite of a profound truth may be another profound truth."

INHALE: The Lord is near

EXHANLE: And the Lord is near

DAY 16

Do not worry about anything... Philippians 4:6

Before we write off this instruction as impossible to follow, let's remember that Paul wrote these words from prison while he awaited news of his possible execution. Of all people, how could he not worry?

The Greek word for worry is actually a compound of the verb “to remember” and the prefix “part of; portion of.” So, to worry is to remember only in part; it is to recall only a portion of the larger story.

I know this is easier said than done. I have a friend who has survived cancer twice. He said that he no longer worries about why terrible things happen to good people. Instead, he believes that bad things can reveal the good in people. This is another way of emphasizing the importance of remembering the bigger picture—the gospel of good news.

INHALE: I worry

EXHALE: I give God my worries



DAY 17

Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none. Luke 3:11

One thing about Advent: whenever I start to feel comfortable about the promises of God for the future, here comes camel-hair-wearing, cricket-eating, crazy-eyed John the Baptist to smack me upside the head with the reality of the present!

First, he calls the crowd of religious folks that had gathered to worship “a brood of vipers” (Luke 3:7). Then, he lays down an ethical demand with no wiggle room—we “must” give the extra coat. Dorothy Day, the Catholic activist, heeded John's advice and wrote, “If you have two coats, you have stolen one from the poor.” Yikes! And amen.

INHALE: Give me what I need

EXHALE: Let me give to others

DAY 18

I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. Luke 3:16

In light of John's ethical demands, it's refreshing to read about his own humility. The lowest slave of the household removed the sandals of the master and washed his feet. John implies that he is even lower than the lowest slave.

The context of this verse is that the crowds were wondering if John was the Messiah, the Anointed One to usher in the Kingdom of Heaven (that's a lot of capital letters). John is saying, "No, I'm lowercase." This does not mean that John had no value or calling. The only difference is that, compared to Jesus, John is a humble servant. Aren't we all?

INHALE: I am humble

EXHALE: I am worthy

DAY 19

But you who are one of the littlest clans of Judah... Micah 5:2

Micah referred to Ephrathah, a city better known by its later name Bethlehem. I think the attention to “the littlest” is a message for all of us.

A ninth-century rabbinic text declares that a procession of angels always accompanies every person, crying out, "Make way, for an image of the Holy One is approaching!" No matter how small or little, every bearer of the divine image has this royal treatment!

In our time, those who are deemed small—whether because of age, intelligence, class, or background—are often overlooked and undervalued, even exploited and executed. This should not be. Perhaps you could envision an angelic procession for everyone you encounter today.

INHALE: I am worthy

EXHALE: They are worthy too

DAY 20

The Mighty One has done great things for me. Luke 1:49

This verse is part of Mary’s song, commonly known as the Magnificat, because her soul “magnifies” the Lord (Luke 1:46). I’m drawn to this other word—mighty. This is an adjective for God frequently found in the Old Testament (Isaiah 9:6, for example). The Hebrew word is *gibbor*.

The other day, I was reading in Breakaway Café, my office away from the office, when a baby, perhaps eight months old, sat in a high chair at a nearby table. The curly, towheaded child was more captivating than my phone. As I watched the kid slap the table with his spoon, I realized he was saying, “Gee-ba! Gee-ba!” While it may not have been perfect Hebrew, this refrain glee served as a paean of praise to the Mighty One who arrived on Earth in the form of a gleeful baby.

INHALE: God is mighty

EXHALE: Gee-ba!

DAY 21

Mercy to those who fear God... Luke 1:50

We continue with Mary's song, introducing a new concept: fear.

My sons play a video game with characters who depict the Greek gods. Zeus in particular is a fearsome dude. The point of the game is to destroy your opponents. Honestly, I don't feel great about this, but I also know that my children understand that it's just a game.

Ancient people genuinely feared the gods and goddesses, perceiving them as capricious, envious, and cruel. They would wield their power against humans as punishment or just for fun. People believed that these deities unleashed terrifying storms and other calamities.

In the Hebrew Bible, we read that *fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom* (Proverbs 9:10). *However, we should understand this "fear" as awe or reverence, not as terror.*

However, I'd counsel you to keep in mind another verse: *Perfect love casts out all fear* (1 John 4:18). Perhaps that's why the calling card of the angels is always, "Do not be afraid!" (See Luke 2:10).

INHALE: God is love

EXHALE: Do not be afraid

DAY 22

A decree from Ceasar to register all the world... Luke 2:1

All the world? Really! What arrogance to imagine that, as a human, one might count every person in every land. But that was Rome for you. Why did they think they could accurately count everyone in a census? Naturally, their intention was to impose taxes on them!

I am not Ceasar, but I am aware that I currently reside in an empire that, if not the richest nation, is incredibly wealthy and powerful, surpassing even Ceasar's imagination. Therefore, it is important to reflect on what I am measuring and the reasons behind my calculations. Where is my attention? Where are my values? As the verse reminds us, *where your treasure is, there shall your heart be also* (Matthew 6:21).

INHALE: I pay attention

EXHALE: God is my treasure

DAY 23

[The angel said] *I bring good news of great joy!* Luke 2:10

Do you remember the introduction to this Advent devotional? I realize it was more than 23 days ago! I wrote about the gospel as good news; the same word has come up again, but this time on the lips of the angel. Perhaps this is why the joy is not just any old joy, but a great joy!

Or, consider this: Can anyone truly limit joy? Every time we experience joy, we are striking an angelic chord within ourselves, which may or may not be more deeply hidden in some than others. But whenever the joy arrives, it is like a fanfare of heavenly trumpets!

INHALE: Good news

EXHALE: Great joy



DAY 24: Christmas Eve

But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart.

This verb “treasure” implies a deep, reflective consideration. It does not mean that Mary understood what happened on an intellectual level. Indeed, why cheapen the miracle with an attempted explanation? Far better, I believe, to treasure it.

So, instead of just one breath prayer on this O Holy Night, I invite you to treasure several verses from Isaiah 9 that are typically read in a Christmas Eve service. And wherever you are, my friend, I wish you a Merry Christmas.

INHALE: The people who walked in darkness
EXHALE: have seen a great light

INHALE: For to us a child is born,
EXHALE: to us a son is given

EXHALE: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
EXHALE: Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Acknowledgements

The practice of breath prayers is an ancient one, and there are many examples in our modern culture. I find the most wisdom in the prayers written by Cole Arthur Riley, which are available online in *Black Liturgies*.

While writing these daily devotionals, I used the following sources of inspiration and study: Sharon Brous, *The Amen Effect*; Padraig O Tuama, *In the Shelter*; Paul N. Walker, *The Almost Daily Devotional*.

Last but not least, Ben Tupper took the photographs. Thanks, Ben!

