***WHEN YOU CAN’T BREATHE***

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Texts: Psalm 116 and Philippians 4:4-7

*I can’t breathe*. Those last words of George Floyd gasped out on a Minneapolis street with the knee of police officer Derek Chauvin on his neck have taken on iconic significance over these last weeks. They are no longer just the plaintive plea of a dying man; they are now repeated as an expression of the pain, frustration, and anger of African-Americans and other communities of color who continue to experience prejudice and racism in their daily lives. It is a powerful symbol – the denial of something as essential to life as breath, something that most of us take for granted day-to-day. Those of us who have more in common racially with the white police officer than with the African-American victim are challenged by that cry to consider in what ways our knees are denying breath to people of color in our communities these days, intentionally or unintentionally, knowingly or unknowingly?

It is ironic, or perhaps providential, that those words, *I can’t breathe,* should become such a powerful symbol in the midst of a pandemic caused by a virus that attacks the respiratory system. People around the world have uttered those same words in describing symptoms of COVID-19. In the midst of the viral surge in March and April, hospitals were desperate to secure enough ventilators to help sick folks breathe, because the virus had attacked their lungs and taken their breath away. General Motors even retooled a plant to make ventilators so that in those places where viral surges hit there would be adequate medical support to care for patients who were having difficulty breathing due to COVID-19. Today in many corners of the world ventilators are still in short supply, and there are few options to restore breath to those who are gasping for air as the virus squeezes the life out of them, one breath at a time.

In the Psalm that we read this morning, the psalmist describes his own suffering in terms that echo those cries of “I can’t breathe”:

*The snares of death encompassed me; the bonds of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered anguish and distress.*

The image is one of being bound by the ropes of death; as the bonds are tightened, life ebbs away. Like a boa constrictor tightening its coils around its prey, death squeezes the life out of the psalmist who cries out in anguish and distress. His pain is not just physical, but also mental, emotional, and spiritual; the psalmist can see no end in sight to his suffering short of the grave. We are not told what brought about his pain – a physical ailment, a grievous injury, or misery inflicted by an enemy. The source of the pain seems to be irrelevant to the psalmist’s plea; his focus is on the reality of his suffering and the source of his help and hope.

Perhaps you know the feeling he describes, that sense of being unable to breathe – not because of COVID-19 or a knee on the neck or COPD or having the wind knocked out of you at second base – but because life has dealt you a blow that has left you gasping for air. Panic attacks can produce such anxiety in some folks as their bodies literally struggle for breath. For others the sudden death of a loved one or a trauma, an unexpected diagnosis or other bad news, can take their breath away – literally and figuratively. For still others the continuing isolation imposed by this pandemic has made it harder to breathe each day as the walls seem to close in. Where do you turn when you can’t breathe, for whatever reason?

The psalmist turns to the Lord: “*Then I called on the name of the Lord, ‘O Lord, save my life!*’” How many times has that prayer been raised from intensive care units and hospital beds in this pandemic? How many times has it been the first thought of those who received word of a positive COVID-19 test? How many times was it raised in the midst of protests that turned violent over these past weeks? *O Lord, save my life*! It is a prayer that is familiar to the psalmist and to many of those who have a sense of God’s constant presence and love for them in all times and in all places. But is it a prayer that is familiar to you? When a tide of troubles overwhelms you or tragedy strikes or you can’t breathe, do you turn to God and call on the name of the Lord? Or do you wallow in your misery or rant in your despair without a thought of the God who might save you?

There is a Hasidic tale in which a disciple asks the rabbi: “*Why does Torah tell us to ‘place these holy words* ***upon*** *your hearts’? Why does it not tell us to place these holy words* ***in*** *our hearts?*” The rabbi answers: “*It is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts. And there they stay until, one day, the heart breaks and the words fall in.*”[[1]](#endnote-1) Sometimes when breathing is easy and life is good we forget God and stubbornly go our own way until some event breaks our hearts open or takes away our breath and allows those holy words to fall in, leading us to turn to God with that plea of the psalmist: “Lord, save my life!”

This pandemic may be one of those times for those who are afflicted by or simply fearful of the virus. The death of George Floyd may be one of those times that confronts us with the reality of racism in our midst and leads us not only to affirm but also to assure that black lives do matter to us because they matter to God, leading us to pray, “Lord, save their lives, save our lives, save my life from what it has been!” The reality is that we cannot do this alone, whether it is fighting the novel coronavirus or addressing the inequities of racism in our society and its structures, or wrestling with whatever else might try to take our breath away. We need God to help us, to guide us, to save us every bit as much as did the psalmist.

His testimony is that God is there to hear our cry. “*When I was brought low, the Lord saved me*,” he sings. “*The Lord delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling*!” God freed him from the grip of death, restored his breath, and put him back on his feet. There are a host of folks in this congregation who would join the psalmist in that song, bearing witness to God’s faithfulness in times of trouble and God’s saving hand at work to bring them through dire days. What God has done gives us confidence in what God will yet do – for us, through us, and when necessary, despite us. In that sure promise is our hope!

An advertisement for a 19th century funeral parlor read as follows:

*For Composing the Features: $1.00*

*For Giving the Features A Look of Quiet Resignation: $2.00*

*For Giving the Features the Appearance of Christian Hope and Contentment: $5.00[[2]](#endnote-2)*

It must have been a harder look to give the dead! But that $5.00 look is available to us in the land of the living, suggests the psalmist. It is a look that reflects the reality of God’s presence in our lives and God’s promises for our future, offering hope and contentment, strength and peace with which to weather the storms that assail us and threaten to take our breath away. For we are precious to God, loved by God, saved by God!

How then do we respond to that God? “*What shall I return to the Lord for all God’s bounty to me?*” asks the psalmist. “*I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord*,” he says. “*I will pay my vows to the Lord and offer a thanksgiving sacrifice,*” he says. The psalmist responds to God with gratitude for what God has done. He does not quickly forget it, but continues to pray long after the danger is past, commits to serve the Lord going forward, and offers a thanksgiving offering. Thus is enacted what the psalmist affirmed at the outset of the psalm, in the very first words of the very first verse: “I love the Lord, for the Lord has heard my voice!”

There is a Scottish proverb that says: *Danger past, God forgotten*. I wonder which more accurately reflects your response to God: the psalmist or the Scottish proverb? How do you express your gratitude to God for what God has done, is doing, and will yet do in your life? If we are to follow the psalmist, then we will call on the name of the Lord in prayer – for the healing of our nation and world; for justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream; for forgiveness for our sins, both individual and corporate; and for God’s Spirit to restore the breath of life to all those who cry, “I can’t breathe!” If we are to follow the psalmist then we will vow to serve the Lord, to do our part to bring about change, to work for justice and peace knowing that peace without justice is not peace! If we are to follow the psalmist, we will make our offerings to God, not out of obligation but out of gratitude for all God’s blessings to us. In sum, if we are to follow the psalmist, then we will begin and end our days as the psalmist begins and ends his psalm – with love and praise of the Lord – who first gave us breath and who stands ready to hear us and to help us when we can’t breathe. Amen

1. Parker J. Palmer, “The Broken-Open Heart: Living with Faith and Hope in the Tragic Gap”, *Weavings*: March/April 2009, p.11 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ernest Campbell, *Campbell’s Notebook*, vol.xvi, no.1, January 1996, p.3 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)