

“WHAT’S IN YOUR LUNGS?”

A Sermon for the Third Sunday of Easter, April 10, 2016

Text: Acts 9:1-20

For a few years a certain bank advertised its credit cards with a challenge: “What’s in your wallet?” The clear implication was that if you carried any other credit card you were missing out on something.

Today we are challenged by our readings to consider what’s in our lungs.

Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

What was in Saul’s lungs?

The only way to tell is by what was coming out of them.

What was coming out of Saul’s lungs? He was “breathing out” threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.

So, what’s in your lungs? The only way other people can tell is by what comes out of them. Talking, you know, is a form of breathing. We breathe in, we breathe out, and as we breathe out we insert words into the airstream, and we call it talking. But you don’t stop breathing to talk. The breath is shaped into words, turned into a message, by means of the vocal cords.

The reason I noticed this peculiar turn of phrase is because of how the story winds up. This is a story of a conversion. At the beginning, Saul is breathing one way. At the end, he is breathing another way. In between, something new has been breathed into his lungs. At the end, he has been “filled with the Holy Breath.”

Let me share a bit of Greek. The word Spirit, when we say “Holy Spirit,” is “pneuma.” The Holy Spirit is “Hagia Pneuma.”

If you look up “Pneuma” in a Greek-English dictionary, you will find a list of alternative meanings. In this order, “wind,” “breath,” “life,” “soul,” “spirit.” So, Holy Spirit could be translated “Holy Wind,” “Holy Breath,” “Holy Life,” “Holy Soul,” “Holy Spirit.” (We used to say “Holy Ghost,” but the word “ghost” has a Germanic root and misleading connotations, so it’s good that we changed over to “Holy Spirit.”)

Back to our story. Saul was breathing one way at the beginning of the story, and breathing a different way at the end of the story. At first, what came out of his mouth was threats of harm to anyone who followed Christ. At the end of the story, what is coming out of his mouth? In verse 20, when Saul stood up in the synagogues and breathed out, what were the words that rode on the breath? “Jesus is the Son of God.”

What’s in your lungs? When you affix words to the breath that is going to come out of you, what are those words? That will say something about the “air in your lungs,” just as what Saul said reflected what was in his lungs.

Do you breathe out criticism and injury? Do you breathe out rivalry and animosity? Do you breathe out courtesy and love? What’s in your lungs—and what comes out, when you open your mouth to speak?

The Greek word used in verse 1 occurs only this one time in the Bible: ἐμπνέων. A lexicon referred me to another instance of an earlier form of the word, in the writings of Epictetus, in which a “persecutor” is

said to be “breathing fury.” Same as here. A persecutor “breathing fury” is giving vent to his feelings, his conviction that followers of Christ were an evil which needed to be eliminated. Thinking this, feeling this, he breathed (out) threats and murder against them.

Saul, later named Paul, testified about himself that at the time of this story, when the risen Christ appeared to him and challenged him, he was the worst of sinners. He had really bad air in his lungs. He was animated by opposition to God. Implacable, fully devoted enmity to the crucified One.

But he changed. How? Someone had breathed a new and right spirit into his lungs. It was neither punishment nor reward that changed Saul, but the infusion of the Spirit of the very Christ whom he was persecuting.

We have in the gospel another case of the risen Christ infusing a new spirit into his disciples. This time, Jesus is not working with his enemies but with his friends. But they, too, needed something new and different in their lungs.

The seven disciples were probably breathing the same sort of language any other fishermen would breathe if they spent the entire night fishing and catching nothing. “Children,” Jesus accosted them, “you have no fish, have you?” When they answered him “No,” Jesus “breathed out” to them the words “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find ‘some.’” In the remainder of the story, Jesus continues to animate his disciples, filling them with confidence; good memories; faith; and consolation. Peter needed a lot of air in his sad lungs because he had used his breath not long before to tell people “I don’t even know who you are talking about,” when asked if he was a disciple.

Jesus needed his disciples to breathe something different, so they had to be in-spirited first. He needed them to breathe gospel to the world.

What’s in your lungs? Do you breathe out good news to others?

It’s a shame when we use the precious commodity of breath to breathe out some of the things we say. Words of condemnation, vituperation, contempt, criticism . . . But the problem is not that we say these things. The problem is what’s in our lungs. We are not virtuous people, if we merely refrain from saying the evil we think.

And what should be in our lungs? David prayed in Psalm 51 for “a new and right spirit,” when he knew he had sinned against God. He used the Hebrew word “*ruach*,” which—no surprise to us—can mean “breath,” “wind,” or “spirit.” It was the *ruach* of God which was active in creation, and it is the *ruach* of God which is the gift of Jesus Christ to all who believe in him.

Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. (Psalm 51:11)

What’s in *our* lungs?

This morning, as every Sunday, our lungs are filled with the Word of God, and what comes out of them, what we witness by our words and songs, is thanksgiving to God, whose mercy towards us has been abundant in Christ Jesus our Lord. In 1 Corinthians 12:3, Paul says that “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Breath, Holy Spirit, Holy Wind, Holy Life. Filled with that Spirit, we unite our voices in praise of God, giving thanks for God’s goodness to us. “What’s in *our* lungs?” The Spirit of our God; the breath of the Resurrected Christ. Amen.