

A Breath of Peace
Psalm 23 & Luke 12:22-31
Towson Presbyterian
July 31, 2022

Good morning, Church! It is good to be with you today.

For those who do not know us, my wife, Jean, and I have been attending and supporting Towson Presbyterian part-time for several years now. My day-to-day work, my ministry, is as a psychotherapist and pastoral counselor. I am a retired United Methodist pastor and, as a retiree, have the privilege of attending several different churches. Honestly, it's fun to attend churches where I don't have to preach or be in charge every Sunday. I especially appreciate churches that are open and accepting of everyone. I am grateful for you, Towson Presbyterian, and for your powerful witness of love, acceptance, and service to this community and far beyond. Sadly, my own denomination, the United Methodist Church, is still divided when it comes to fully welcoming our LGBTQ brothers, sisters, parents, and children. I love many things about my denomination, but I unreservedly love my family. I strive to love every human being God has created, as I have been loved. It is important to me to support a church that shares our values of being inclusive, curious, compassionate, and courageous. I love that phrase. That is why we are here. Thank you for being who you are and for your warm welcome to everyone.

My longest pastorate was at Hiss United Methodist church in Parkville, Maryland. There, I was honored to work the entire 8 years with your very own Dianne Thompson, who

was our beloved director of evangelism and communications.

I'm jumping ahead in the church calendar today with a bit of emphasis on the Holy Spirit, which the church normally celebrates on Pentecost Sunday. I'm doing so in order to share with you a part of what I do in my pastoral counseling ministry, in the hopes that it may help feed your souls and heal your hearts.

I am grateful that you have learned and experienced some of this from the ministries of Joel and Rob, especially their emphasis on spiritual disciplines.

The Holy Spirit – it's often referred to using the metaphors of wind and fire. Indeed, the word for spirit in Greek and Hebrew is wind. However, I want us to encounter the Holy Spirit in a very personal way today. I invite you to consider the Holy Spirit as breath. The breath of God. The breath of the Spirit. The breath that moves through our mouths, noses, throats, and lungs right this moment. God's Spirit is as close, or closer than, the breath that is moving through us right now. Take a moment to feel that Spirit. Breathe it in and out.

One of the things I have appreciated most about my pastoral counseling education has been the use of silence, breathing exercises, and mindfulness meditation. We did this at the beginning of most of our classes over the three years I was in school. I admit that it took me a while to get used to it. We don't use a lot of silence in the United Methodist church. When I was growing up, on many Sundays, we had a moment of silent prayer in worship. It was typically only about 15 seconds long. If it was any

longer, people would start getting uncomfortable, shift in their seats, and start peeking to see if everybody else was still there. If the moment of silence was longer than a minute, you could just feel the anxiety rising in the room. So, during my ministry, I haven't used silence very much, just on certain occasions to make a point.

I now see this as a significant omission. There is a lot of benefit from using silence and meditation in worship, particularly because it gives us a chance to listen and speak with God in our own words and our own way. It also gives us a chance to *experience* God. Experiencing God is more than hearing, speaking, and thinking about God, which is what we do most often in church.

In some churches and religious traditions, silence and meditation are much more common. There was a long tradition of Christian meditation in the early church, particularly during the times of the desert fathers and mothers and in the monastic traditions. Meditation is common in many eastern religious practices. However, Christians can use it, too. It is part of our tradition, a tradition that I think we ought to reclaim and use more broadly.

So, today, I thought I would give you the opportunity to experience Christian meditation. It's a time for us to stop doing, for just a little while, and spend some time being. During the next few minutes, I will lead you in a breathing exercise, move into a meditative reading of what is one of the most comforting passages in the Bible, the 23rd Psalm, then conclude with another period of breathing.

Throughout this time, I want you to be comfortable. You can participate as much or as little as you want. I want you to experience this as a gift, but not as an obligation. So, get yourselves comfortable. Sit in a comfortable position. If you want to close your eyes, that's great, but, if not, just find a spot on the floor or the pew in front of you and focus your eyes on it. I often focus on the candles when I meditate during worship, the symbol of prayer rising up to heaven. As we are doing this exercise, it's ok if you fall asleep. That's perfectly all right. Don't judge yourself. When you awaken, just go back to breathing and experiencing.

I invite you now to pay special attention to your breathing. Feel the air coming into your lungs and going out. Notice what happens as the air passes through your nose, your mouth, your throat, and your lungs. If possible, breathe in through your nose, and breathe out through your mouth. Take a moment and focus on your breathing. [pause] Now, on your inbreath, imagine yourself breathing in peace. On your outbreath, imagine yourself breathing out love. Breathe in peace, breathe in peace, breathe out love. Breathe in peace, breathe out love. Breathe in peace, breathe out love. Do that on your own for a few moments. [pause]

Continue to focus on breathing in peace and breathing out love. You are receiving peace. Take in that peace. Breathe in peace and breathe out love.

Continue to breathe, and I will begin to read the 23rd Psalm to you. I invite you to *experience* God's presence in this Psalm. Avoid thinking about, analyzing it, just try to experience it. I am not inviting you into an intellectual exercise, but a feeling exercise. Pay attention to the feelings

that come up in you as I read. Think if you want to, but try to notice the thoughts that come up and let them pass by. Let yourself *be* in the presence of God. Continue to breathe in peace and breathe out love.

Psalm 23 (NRSV)

¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures;

[feel and smell the grass]

he leads me beside still waters;^[a]

[touch the water, smell the freshness, take a taste of that good, clear water. Use all of your senses as you rest in this place.]

³ he restores my soul.^[b] [feel yourself growing stronger, healing]

He leads me in right paths^[c]

for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley,^[d]

I fear no evil;

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff—

they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely^[e] goodness and mercy^[f] shall follow me

all the days of my life,

and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD

my whole life long.^[g]

[conclude with breathing exercise]

Breathe in peace, breath out love.

Now I invite you to come back into this place, as you feel ready. Open your eyes, stretch. Keep what you experienced as you continue through this day and this week. At any time, you are welcome to repeat this exercise on your own.

Indeed, may we be blessed every day by the very real, the very present, Holy Spirit of God. May it give us the peace we need to handle all the troubles and sufferings that come, and the holy work we need to do.

--- Rev. Mark Smiley

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Luke 12:22-31 Do Not Worry

²² [Jesus] said to his disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. ²³ For life is more than food and the body more than clothing. ²⁴ Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! ²⁵ And which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life?^[a] ²⁶ If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? ²⁷ Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin,^[b] yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ²⁸ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, you of little faith! ²⁹ And do not keep seeking what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. ³⁰ For it is the nations^[c] of the world that seek all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. ³¹ Instead, seek his^[d] kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.