

Text: 2 Timothy 3:14 – 4:5
Title: The Nature of Scripture
Date: 10.20.19
Roger Allen Nelson

On a spring Saturday in Schenectady I was studying scripture for a sermon.
That's the entry for the letter "S" in the Dr. Seuss ABC Book....

My study was in a house that was built shortly after the American Revolution featuring all the subtle gifts of drafty windows, creaky walls, and desk drawers that wouldn't stay shut because of the slanted-sagging wood floors. But, it was the space where I learned the habit of reading, praying, studying, thinking, wondering, and wrestling all week, but not writing the sermon until Saturday.

And on that spring Saturday in Schenectady I stumbled across a line in the book of Isaiah that I'd never seen before. I came across an image that tickled my imagination and whose beauty pulled me upright. It was like a window had been pushed open. Something breathed in me and I thought: I can dig around in scripture for the rest of my life and always find the soil fertile. I can turn these texts over and over and over and
never run out of material,
never run out of mystery,
never run out of meaning,
and never run out of breath.

Now that may not seem like much of a breakthrough to you, but for me it was an epiphany that, quite frankly, gave me the freedom to consider a call to Hope Church. Without that moment (and a few years of therapy) I don't think I'd be here doing this. Something breathed in me....

God-breathed, *theopneustos*, is what Paul calls scripture in his second letter to Timothy. God-breathed....

This is the only place in scripture where that word or phrase is used. And it's probably helpful to note that when Paul wrote, "all scripture is *theopneustos*" he was not referring to the New Testament (since it hadn't been written or gathered) and the Old Testament (of which he was probably speaking) hadn't been fully canonized and was a loose collection of writings that resided primarily in synagogues and temples. And, truth be told, at that time there would have been scrolls and prophecies and poetry in those collections that eventually don't make the cut as scripture....

But. But, what becomes scripture, what becomes the Bible in your hand, is a library full of all sorts of literary genres written by all sorts of people from all sorts of places with all sorts of voices over all sorts of time. It is a library that was copied, collected, handed down, copied again, translated, canonized and.... And the unifying thread is that it is all God-breathed.

All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that all God's people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

So, dear friends, what does that mean?

What does it mean that scripture is God-breathed?

I can't do justice to that question in the confines of one sermon, but there may be an idea or theme here that is helpful and encouraging and honest to God.

Orthodox wisdom is that God breathed, God inspired, the writers to write and therefore the words are God's words, and the truths that those words represent are God's truths. In the words of the Belgic Confession of 1561:

...our God ~ because of the special care he has for us and our salvation ~ commanded his servants, the prophets and apostles, to commit this revealed word to writing...

And we believe without a doubt all things contained in them ~ not so much because the church receives and approves them as such but because the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that they are from God, and also because they prove themselves to be from God.

The sermon last week was entitled "The Nature of God." This morning, "The Nature of Scripture." Clearly a preacher swinging for the fences....

However, father-husband-friend-churchman-and-philosopher Aron Reppmann reminded me that talk of "the nature" of something is fraught with pitfalls and presuppositions. It suggests that we are naming qualities that reside in the thing....
rather than considering our interaction,
rather than considering what happens in the relationship,
rather than considering what we can know – which is our experience with the thing.

And, in that spirit I want to suggest that the God-breathed quality of scripture means something more than how the writers write and what we confess about some quality that resides in the text, but it also says something about our engagement with it.

Last week I came into the office with a heavy heart. The brokenness of folks at Hope – the kind of brokenness that we don't talk about or only speak of in private hushed tones was on my mind. The daily sludge out of Washington D.C. was baffling and appalling. I was discouraged and anxious about all manner of things. The familiar framing of the windows of the corner office and the familiar pattern of sermon writing was predictably boring and bland. But, while looking for texts that included *hesed*, the unfailing love and mercy of God, I read these lines:

“Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed,” says the Lord who has compassion on you.

And something in me breathed.

The God-breathed quality wasn't in the writing; it was in the reading. Now, I know that I was appropriating the promises that God made to Israel through Isaiah into my own sense of uncertainty and anxiety, and I was letting those ancient words have something to do with today, but I also remembered reading those lines on the edge of the bed to one dying of cancer. I know that the mountains will shake and the hills will be removed, and I took a measure of peace in the promise of *hesed*. And something in me breathed.

Could it be that the breath of God blows life into those words....

in the same way that the breath of God is breathed into the dusty-stone-cold-nostrils of Adam, and the breath of God would breathe into the dry bones littering the valley at Ezekiel's feet, and the breath of God blows through a room in Jerusalem filling it with tongues of fire?

The God-breathed quality of scripture is not limited to its inception, but when we read these lines, when we listen for that voice, something comes to life and God speaks.

I don't mean in the manner that's magical or mechanical, but in some mysterious way the very breath of God lifts words and phrases and ideas and stories and themes and images and they give us life.

And, that is to suggest that the God-breathed quality of scripture is like respiration, there is an in-and-out. It has an active, dynamic, organic, life-giving quality. God continues to breathe through these letters, through these lines, through this library. That we might be “thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

Deb Rienstra writes of camping with friends on the shores of Lake Michigan hoping that a certain cello-playing-boy who sat next to her in orchestra would be camping that weekend as well. In her words:

Next thing I knew, there I was alone with him on a starry spring night, sitting beside him atop his corduroy jacket beneath a giant beech tree. I don't remember exactly what happened, but somewhere in the maelstrom of my fifteen-year-old feelings, a thought occurred to me: If I kiss him now, then he is my boyfriend. Is that going to be okay with God? I remember somehow excusing myself from the situation, trotting back to the camper and – yes, it's true – opening my Bible.

She writes later:

Whatever passage I actually turned to was no help at all. I guess God, no doubt thoroughly amused, let me make up my own mind. I went back out there and kissed the boy.

To suggest that God-breathes in the reading is not to say that we flip open the pages and find directions for dating, or dinner, or when to retire. The Bible is not a Ouija board. But, could it be that over time, like breath, it seeps in and slips through and prompts and pummels and shakes and changes and challenges and comforts and questions and enlivens us?

We will disagree about what it means.

We will wrestle with it and feel suffocated by it.

We will find it dull and disagreeable at times.

We will find it vibrant and rich, like soil in which to dig for a lifetime.

We will need the voices of others to hear it....

the voices of history, the voices of the poor and the dispossessed, the voices of the Hebrews, voices that are other than our own.

We will need time to listen for its breath....

time to let the rhythm of our breathing find the respirations of God.

In a way that is different than all other great literature, can we find in this library the breathing of God?

When I started this "Letters to a Young Christian" sermon series I was hoping to help folks who were new to Hope or new to faith. I don't know that it's lived into those hopes. But, I do know I know that learning the breathing of God through scripture is essential to the life of faith.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes about the God-breathed quality of scripture this way:

I know that the Bible is a special kind of book, but I find it seductive as any other. If I am not careful, I can begin to mistake the words on the pages for the realities they describe. I can begin to love the dried ink marks on the page more than I love the encounters that gave rise to them. If I am not careful, I can decide that I am really much happier reading my Bible than I am entering into what God is doing in my own time and place, since shutting the book to go outside will involve the very great risk of taking part in stories that are still taking shape. Neither I nor anybody else knows how those stories will turn out, since at this point there is more blood than ink. The whole purpose of the Bible, it seems to me, is to convince people to set the written word down in order to become living words in the world for God's sake. For me, this willing conversion of ink back to blood is the full substance of faith.

Breath to blood to ink to breath to blood.

The breathing of God.

May it be so with us.

Amen.