



**VILLAGE  
CHURCH**  
Presbyterian (USA)

# Breathe in God's Mercies

SCRIPTURE:  
Isaiah 42:5-9

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September 24, 2023 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

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**T**hese are poignant days, my friends, as we learn that our pastor of nearly 20 years brings to a close his time with us. Tom is preaching his last four sermons from this pulpit—each one focused on a phrase he has said and that we have come to love.

I have only been with you for eight years, so I do not have the breadth and depth of phrases that Tom does but I do have this phrase that I began to use when I was teaching at Columbia Seminary, before I came to be with you. “Breathe in God’s mercies. Breathe out God’s mercies to the world.” It is by no means unique to me. The act of thoughtful breathing, of breathwork exercises, has been with humankind since nearly our first breath. Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, especially, in these high holy days right now, all engage in the contemplative practice of breathing.

We were at our baccalaureate service the night before graduation one year. The faculty robe in our academic gowns and we sit in the pews in front of the graduates who are also robed. That year the guest preacher—a Baptist pastor of a large Black congregation in Atlanta—got up and before he began to preach, invited us to breathe in God’s mercies and breathe out God’s mercies to the world. Behind me was seated one of my doctoral students and he leaned forward and said, “Hey, Dr. Nishioka, he stole that from you!” And I whispered back. “It’s not original to me.”

So I invite you do it. Breathe in God’s mercies. Breathe out God’s mercies to the world. When you do that, you give more oxygen to your body. You lower your heartrate. You lower your blood pressure. It goes without saying that we do not live without breathing.

Several years ago, my Dad was diagnosed with pneumonia and I called to check on him. He told me he was doing fine. I asked about his medication and

sure enough, he was on antibiotics. Then I asked about breathing exercises and he said, “yes.” They had given him one of those spirometers. It’s a little device where you breathe into it and it moves the plastic ball to get you to breathe as deeply as needed to clear out your lungs of infection. They are effective but you must do the exercises several times per day. So I asked Dad if he was doing the exercises and he said, “Yes, I am.” But he sounded sort of reluctant. So, I said, “Well, Dad, you need to do those exercises to heal and get well but it’s up to you. If you don’t do them, then you’ll just get sicker and die and that’s okay because you’ll go to heaven and you can see Mom but if you want to live even a little longer, you need to do those exercises. Okay, Dad?” Complete silence. And I said, “Dad?” Then he said, “Um, Roddy, (that was his name for me) do you go visit people in the hospital and in their homes?” And I said, “Oh, yes. All the time. I love doing that. I am honored to be with people in hospital rooms and their homes.” And Dad said, “Well, when you go visit them, do you talk to them the way you talk to me?” “Oh no, Dad! I’m much nicer to them.” “Oh, okay, Roddy.”

Breathe in God’s mercies. Breathe out God’s mercies to the world.

Susan Lord is one of the saints of this church. A longtime, faithful member here and then at Village on Antioch. She died last year and is now in that great cloud of witnesses. She was in rehab and I went to visit her. She was in a room at Ignite, a rehabilitation facility across the street from the KU hospital main campus. It was evening and there was a thunderstorm moving through the area and we were watching the storm from the window of her room. As I was visiting with her, she moved on her bed and winced. I asked her about the pain. She had told me she didn’t like the pain meds because it made her sleep all the time and her brain fuzzy. She resisted

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taking the medication as long as she could. I told her the pain medication was there for a reason and she knew that. Then she said, “You know what I do when the pain gets bad? I do that thing you do. I breathe in God’s mercies and I breathe out God’s mercies to the world. When it gets really bad, each time I breathe in, I say, ‘Jesus.’ And then when I breathe out, I say, ‘Jesus’ like I am sending him out to the world even though I know he’s already there. It helps.”

Breathe in God’s mercies. Breathe out God’s mercies to the world.

I was called to join the faculty of Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta in January 2000, the start of the spring semester. I remember walking around the campus wondering to myself, “What am I doing here?” You have to understand that at my first faculty meeting, I was sitting next to Dr. Catherine Gunsalus Gonzalez who, with her husband, wrote the church history textbook I used in seminary. On my right side was Dr. Shirley Guthrie, one of the best theological minds of the church who studied with Karl Barth, the Swiss theologian who many believe was the greatest theological mind of the 20th century. Across the table from me was Professor Marcia Riggs who founded the field of womanist ethics. The first faculty person to invite me to lunch was Walter Brueggemann who wrote most of the Old Testament. I was so nervous I couldn’t sleep the night before. What am I going to say to Walter Brueggemann? I am going to sound like a complete idiot to him. I got to the restaurant early and stood outside and literally breathed in and out just to calm my nerves. I had my eyes closed and was breathing when I heard this deep, rough voice, say, “What’s wrong? Is the restaurant closed?” “Uh, no. Dr. Brueggemann. I’m sure they’re open. I was just standing here breathing.” “Oh, well, that’s good. Breathing is good. I do it a lot. Do you want to keep breathing out here or shall we go in and eat and breath?” And that lunch began a friendship that I cherish to this day.

So, if you are living your own imposter syndrome or you have an important exam in school or you hear the diagnosis you’ve been dreading or you’ve

betrayed someone’s trust or you can feel the anxiety rising in you so high that you are afraid you are going to jump out of your skin, breathe in God’s mercies. And then breathe out God’s mercies to the world. That’s what I love about the passage from second Isaiah today.

In the Hebrew language, the word for “breath” and “spirit” and “wind” is the same. “Ruach.” In Genesis 2, we read, “then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.” So the breath that is in you is the very breath of God. When you breathe in God’s mercies, God’s own breath is filling you. So whatever you are facing, you remember that when you breathe. Ruach. But we do not just breathe in God’s mercies. We breathe out God’s mercies. We send God’s breath out into the world. We inhale and we exhale. The passage from second Isaiah continues:

“I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.”

We breathe in God’s mercies not just for ourselves but for the healing of the world. “I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations.” We cannot keep God’s mercies to ourselves.

Every time the church has focused on her own survival above all else, she has lost her way. We do not exist for ourselves. We exist as a light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

Come on, church! We were created for this. That’s why God’s breath is in us and God’s spirit is carrying us and God’s wind is blowing through us.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.