

Groaning for Breath

Exodus 2:23-23; Romans 8:22-23; Acts 2:1-21

Pentecost Day, (May 31) 2020

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Please, please. I can't breathe... I can't breathe, officer.

George Floyd, Minneapolis, MN,

May 25, 2020

I can't breathe!

Eric Garner, Staten Island, NY

July 17, 2014

The Israelites groaned under their slavery and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose to God. God heard their groaning.

Exodus 2:23-24

The Apostle Paul says, “all creation is groaning.” He uses the image of labor pain to talk about the New Creation in Christ coming into our old world. This is not easy. The old way is gripped by Death and Sin, domination and exploitation. It holds us in bondage. It does not yield to the Living Christ’s Movement of resurrection and justice, of abundant life and freedom without fighting to regain control and domination. The old way uses violence and intimidation. It crucifies and lynches. The old way of Death puts its knee on necks and chokes.

All creation is groaning.

In Minneapolis George Floyd groaned this week, “Please, please, I can’t breathe... I can’t breathe, officer.” Over and over he groaned. He gasped, he struggled to breathe. He struggled to get breath. But the police officer, who already had him down on the ground in handcuffs, had his knee on Mr. Floyd’s neck and refused to relent, refused to pay any attention to him for over eight minutes. When the EMT’s arrived, Mr. Floyd was unresponsive and was pronounced dead at the hospital.

George Floyd grew up in Houston’s Third Ward and was a devout Christian involved in street ministry in some of the roughest places in Houston. He was known as a gentle giant who sought the way of peace over violence, the way of Jesus instead of the way of guns. He moved to Minneapolis a couple of years ago to pursue a job related to Christian ministry working with young people on the streets.

The police said Mr. Floyd was resisting arrest but all the eyewitnesses plus the videos of the arrest all agree that Mr. Floyd did not resist and that the police ignored his groaning for breath, his crying out.

Mr. George Floyd was a 46-year-old black man.

In July 2014 Eric Garner, in Staten Island, NY said, “I can’t breathe!” eleven times on camera, as he was held in an illegal chokehold by police officers, with his hands cuffed behind his back. Eleven times, as he was on the ground, face-down, pleading “I can’t breathe!”

The only response from the police officer was “F--- your breath!”

Even after he went limp, and the officers released the chokehold, after he was unconscious on the ground, face-down for seven minutes – no one checked on him, no one checked to see if he was breathing. EMT's were called and eventually tried CPR on him. And at the emergency room of the hospital he was pronounced dead upon arrival. The coroner ruled it a homicide, but the grand jury made no indictments. The primary police officer responsible was fired. But that was all.

Mr. Eric Garner was a 27-year-old black man.

All creation is groaning. Crying out, "I can't breathe."

Along with George Floyd and Eric Garner, we can add the names of Breonna Taylor, an Emergency Medical Technician in Louisville, KY, who was shot 8 times when she was in her own bed, and in her own residence, when police broke down the front door on March 13. Not properly announcing themselves as police, Ms. Taylor's boyfriend pulled his own gun – for which he had a proper license – and fired at the intruders. In turn they sprayed the apartment with bullets killing Ms. Taylor. She was a 26-year-old black woman.

Or the name of Ahmaud Arbery, the 25-year-old unarmed black man jogging in Brunswick, GA on Feb. 23. Two white men chased him down and shot him. Arrests were made only this month after the video was made public.

We can go on and on – jogging while black, sleeping while black, trying to breathe while black. All creation is groaning. All creation cries out, "I can't breathe!"

For the last two months we have been self-quarantining due to COVID-19. One of its primary symptoms is having trouble breathing and tightness in the chest, with respiratory failure listed as the primary reason for COVID-19 related death. In order to keep COVID-19 from spreading, we are staying inside as much as possible, shut-in, shut-down, locked-in, and locked-down – not just in Nacogdoches and Texas but the entire country, indeed, the entire world.

All creation is groaning. We can't breathe.

COVID-19 is one of a number of new diseases that have been popping up over the last decade or so. As the climate changes, diseases change, pestilences change, pathogens change, and microbes and viruses mutate, change, and develop in ways previously unforeseen.

In other words, all creation is groaning, gasping for breath, while we deny anything is wrong, even though we have our knees on the climate's neck.

Whenever and wherever we see or participate in the domination, extraction, and exploitation of others and of creation, especially in the interest of power, control, and money, you see our knees on the neck of creation. The Apostle Paul called it the Power of Sin and Death. Sometimes it is known as Pharaoh, or Empire, White Supremacy, or the Plantation system or the global economy. The same system on the plantation that fueled the burgeoning capitalism of the late 18th and 19th century in America and the world is the same system that fuels the global economy today and is the same system that fueled the Pharaoh's economy in the Bible.

Pharaoh's Egyptian Empire and Pyramid Scheme used cheap labor to fuel the most powerful economy of that ancient world. These cheap laborers, these slaves, are worked 24/7 all the time, every day, every week, every month, every year, every generation to make the quota of bricks determined by Pharaoh's managers, to make that bottom-line, to make that next goal, increase those profits, exceed expectations. And if they exceed the margin today, tomorrow has to be better. It never ends. The Bible says that these exploited workers, these slaves "groaned" in their slavery under Pharaoh. They cried out to Pharaoh, "We can't breathe!" But Pharaoh said, "F--- your breath!" and choked them even more. So they groaned to God, "We can't breathe!" And the Bible says, "God heard their groaning...God looked upon the Israelites, and God paid attention to them" (Exodus 2:23-25).

Moses said to Pharaoh, "Thus says the Lord God of Israel, 'Let my people go, so that they may go three days out into the wilderness and worship the Lord God'" (Ex. 5:1-3). In other words, "Let my people have some breathing room. Let them worship the God who gives life and gives breath."

Finally, after all of the plagues and all of the struggle and intervention of God, the Israelites are set free in order to go to a new place where they can have some breathing room and worship the God of life and breath.

This is the biblical story. In the Old Testament it is slavery and freedom in the land of promise and hope. In the New Testament it is the cross and resurrection. But the story is always about moving from death to life, from being choked to death, to being able to breathe the abundant life God promises.

Luke tells us in the 2nd chapter of Acts that on the Day of Pentecost the disciples were shut-in a locked room, a stifling room. But no matter, they were in prayer, they were groaning to God, waiting on God and suddenly there came from heaven a sound like the rush of a powerful wind and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. “Ruach” in Hebrew, which literally means “desert wind,” blows through. Doors are blown open, curtains are flapping, shutters rattle back and forth, dust and debris and leaves blow, furniture is blown over. Wind, ruach – and then fire among them. In the confusion they were filled with the wind, the breath of God, and all of a sudden they have power and courage and love more than fear. They began to speak in one another’s languages as they spoke of God’s great and mighty works. They begin to listen to one another and they’re able to understand one another. People who have been choking suddenly have others who can hear their groaning. People who have participating in choking others, suddenly realize what they’ve been doing and repent, change, and do something about it. People who have been choked are resuscitated by God and can breathe!

The whole book of Acts is about this Spirit of God blowing and giving breathe to all creation, to Samaritans, God-fearers, eunuchs, and Gentiles, crossing boundaries, reconciling, healing, and making whole. Everyone who is hemmed-in, cut-off, shut-in, exiled, ostracized, labeled, marginalized, clamped-down, beaten-down, ground-down, locked-down, intimidated, and afraid. Everyone who is being choked to death, God’s Spirit of Life blows and gives breath! Read the book of Acts!

When the old system of Death – of privilege and supremacy, exploitation and control were threatened by Jesus Christ, they crucified him. They choked him

and they lynched him on a tree. But the Living God would not and will not give up. After three days, Christ Jesus was resurrected – it was the beginning of God’s New Creation.

Here in Acts 2, that same Spirit of the Living God that resurrected Jesus, blows through the locked-down stifling church that is scared to say anything. But the Holy Spirit empowers to new living, the Christ-Way, the New Creation. The breath of God gives boldness to speak up and speak out instead of cowering or living in denial. Instead of exploiting others, trying to make a buck off of others, they start sharing. Instead of each and every person “looking out for number 1” they started looking out for one another. Instead of trying to remain in control, they started listening, giving up control, and learning to trust God’s Way of the New Creation in Christ.

All creation is groaning, choking to death on racism, choking on guns, choking on hatred and fear, choking on bigotry, choking on hopelessness. People who are impoverished and those in the middle class are choking on debt while the richest are reaping obscene amounts of money.

We have the finest sports arenas and complexes in the world while our public schools suffer from lack of development and our teachers are underpaid, under-appreciated, and over-worked – our children are being choked to death.

We have fewer and fewer people voting in elections because they feel, “What’s the use?” while those in power find ways to make it harder to vote rather than finding ways to increase voting – our democracy is being choked to death.

Some of us are in denial that we are being choked to death, others of us are in despair that anything can be done, while a few fear the changes that are coming. But hear me! God's mighty wind is blowing.

There is hope. With clearing skies, we can see creation healing since we have cut back on our participation in Pharaoh's frenetic economy. We can see and hear the wind of God blowing where it chooses and we do not know where it comes from or where it will go, as Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3. In other words, we don't know what will happen so hold on to our hats and get ready to be blown in new directions. Get ready to breathe like we've never breathed before!

The Wind of God blows, renewing us, opening our blind eyes to the truth, opening our choked breathing passages to God's Way. The Wind of God empowers us to share CPR, mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. God calls and God empowers us to be bold, to be brave to go out there where people are being choked to death. God calls us to inhale God's breath and in turn, go out and breathe, exhale into the choking-to-death world.

Bryan Stevenson is a young African American death penalty lawyer, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, and one of the primary founders of the National Lynching memorial and museum in Montgomery, AL. He is also the author of the wonderful book, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, which was made into a powerful movie last year. Early in the book, he tells of meeting Rosa Parks, who about once a year would come back to visit Montgomery, AL and see her dear friend, Johnnie Carr. Bryan would be invited to come and listen and wait on them, refilling their cups of tea, and so on, but it was clear that his job was to listen and learn, not talk.

Stevenson writes that after a couple of visits over a couple of years, one day, “Rosa Parks turned to me sweetly and asked, ‘Now, Bryan, tell me who you are and what you’re doing.’ I looked at Ms. Carr to see if I had permission to speak, and she smiled and nodded at me. I then gave Ms. Parks my rap. ‘Yes, ma’am. Well, I have a law project called the Equal Justice Initiative, and we’re trying to help people on death row. We’re trying to stop the death penalty, actually. We’re trying to do something about prison conditions and excessive punishment. We want to free people who’ve been wrongly convicted. We want to end unfair sentences in criminal cases and stop racial bias in criminal justice...”

He went on, “Ms. Parks leaned back smiling. ‘Ooooh, honey, all that’s going to make you tired, tired, tired.’ We all laughed. I looked down, a little embarrassed. Then Ms. Carr leaned forward and put her finger in my face and talked to me just like my grandmother used to talk to me. She said, ‘That’s why you’ve got to be brave, brave, brave.’ Both elderly women nodded in silent agreement...”

Austin Heights Baptist Church we tend to get tired, tired, tired, so we want to pray, pray, pray for the Spirit of the Living God to make us brave, brave, brave.

We’d better get ready. The Wind is already blowing.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.