

May 10th, 2026

Acts 17:22-31 “The Air We Breathe”

Good morning! Hey, check this out. I woke up breathing this morning. It was awesome! And because I woke up breathing, I assumed that I must have been breathing while I was asleep. I breathed through breakfast. I breathed while I was getting dressed for church. I breathed while I practiced this sermon. I’m breathing right now. And unless something has gone terribly wrong, all of you are breathing too. Right?

None of us woke up this morning and made a conscious decision to breathe. We didn’t earn the privilege. We didn’t achieve it. We just did it. Every single day, we depend on something we didn’t create and can’t completely control. Now, we do have *some* control over our breathing. We can slow it down. Speed it up. Hold it for a little while. And if there’s one thing I’ve learned from yoga, it’s that the way we breathe matters. Breathing affects stress. Focus. Anxiety. Endurance. Health. If you’re snorkeling in a coral reef, you have to hold your breath because humans aren’t built to breathe underwater. If you’re lifting weights and holding your breath while straining to push the bar up, eventually you’re going to get lightheaded and pass out. Surgeons learn how to regulate their breathing so their hands remain steady during delicate procedures. Breath matters because breath is life.

And that's important because our scripture today is deeply concerned with breath. With life. With what sustains us. Our text comes from the Acts of the Apostles, which I've always thought should be called "The Acts of the Holy Spirit."

Because honestly, most of the apostles wouldn't have known what to do without the Spirit leading them. Acts was written by the same author who wrote Luke's Gospel. It was written primarily for Gentiles, non-Jewish people living throughout the Roman Empire. From the very beginning, Luke makes it clear that the Spirit is the driving force behind the birth of the church. Today's story takes place in Athens. Even though Rome was the political center of the empire, Athens was the intellectual center. They were into philosophy, education, debate, and culture. This was a city filled with thinkers.

The people Paul is speaking to are not church people. They don't know the Hebrew scriptures. They don't know the stories of Jesus. So, Paul can't begin where he usually begins. Instead, he starts with something they already understand. They were seekers. They were searching and wondering. They were trying to make sense of the world. They were trying to name this feeling that there's something bigger than themselves. Paul notices an altar dedicated "to an unknown god," and instead of mocking them for it, he uses it as a starting point.

I actually appreciate that about Paul. Because I think a lot of people know that feeling that there's something bigger. I know I do. As far back as I can remember, I've always

sensed there was something beyond me. Something larger than what I could see or explain. I didn't have language for it yet. Thankfully, the town I grew up in didn't have a kindergarten that was connected to the public school system. The only option was a Lutheran church that was certified to have a kindergarten program. This is where I remember hearing about God for the first time. And honestly, it connected with something in me. I can still remember listening to the pastor — who, for a while, I thought was called the “pasture” of the church — talking about this unseen presence called God. And even as a little kid, something about it rang true. The idea that there was a presence bigger than me. A presence trying to communicate with humanity. A presence calling people toward love and justice and compassion, even though we humans don't always listen very well. That was the beginning of my spiritual journey.

It took years for those pieces to come together. In high school I started taking faith more seriously and trying to figure out what I actually believed. I visited different churches. I asked a lot of questions. I had moments of clarity and moments of doubt. And thankfully, there were people in my life who didn't shame me for asking hard questions. They helped guide me through the process. And hey, I'm *still* learning. I'm still growing. And yes, I'm still asking questions too. More than fifty years after that first introduction to God, I'm standing here as your pastor, still trying to help people discover that same presence. And I

think that's important because we're living in a moment where a lot of people are wrestling with faith.

Over the last several years, more and more people have started speaking publicly about the damage caused by toxic religion. These are people who were manipulated, shamed, controlled, and hurt by churches that cared more about power than compassion. And honestly, some of that criticism is justified. Some churches have presented God in ways that are more about fear and control than grace and love. Some of these folks walk away from those experiences but choose to hold onto their faith. And God bless them for that. The term for it is "deconstruction." They're not giving up on God or faith, they're giving up on a brand of religion that takes away more than it gives.

But others walk away completely. Some identify as atheists and believe religion itself is the problem. They argue that faith gets in the way of critical thinking and human progress. They believe maturity means outgrowing spirituality altogether. But here's the thing. I don't think the answer is *burying* that deep human longing for meaning and transcendence. I think the task is helping people reconnect with it in healthy, life-giving ways. That's what Paul is doing here in Athens. And remember, these Athenians are not gullible people. They're philosophers. Thinkers. Educated people who are just trying to make sense out of existence.

Paul sees that searching and says, “Listen, you’re a lot closer than you realize. That ‘something’ you’ve been trying to name is not just some vague cosmic energy floating around the universe. It’s God. It’s the one who gives life and breath to all beings everywhere. And then Paul says something absolutely breathtaking (no pun intended). He says, “In him we live and move and have our being.” This isn’t something we visit occasionally. It’s not something we just check in with once a week. It’s not something that we can only encounter in church. In God we live and move and exist. God is not distant from creation. God is the environment of our lives. The very source of our being, which means the Spirit isn’t something we go out and acquire like something you’d buy off the shelf in a grocery store. We’re already surrounded by it. We’re already sustained by it. We’re already immersed in it. I know I’ve mentioned this before, but in Greek, the words for “spirit” and “breath” are the same word. How you translate the word is all about context. Back in seminary, we all had to take two years of Greek to get through the program. And let me tell you, Greek is not easy. The professors loved giving us passages that forced us to wrestle with interpretation. One day we were translating a passage from Luke about a man possessed by an “unclean spirit.” And everybody in class translated it the same. “Unclean spirit.” The professor smiled and said, “Interesting. But what if the man just had really bad breath?” Because technically speaking, the phrase could also be translated “unclean breath.”

Now obviously context matters. Luke is talking about spiritual oppression, not halitosis. But the point stuck with me. Spirit and breath are deeply connected. And honestly, that changes the way I hear Paul's words here. "In God we live and move and have our being." It means every breath becomes sacred. Every inhale is a gift. Every exhale is participation. The Spirit of God is not far away. It's closer than the air entering your lungs right now. And if that's true, then a whole lot of other things are true too. Anything that tells you that you are less than fully alive does not get the final word. Fear doesn't. Shame doesn't. Despair doesn't. Systems that rank human worth don't. Empires don't. Because if God is as close as your next breath, then your life is already held in something greater than all of that.

And that's the idea I want us to carry home today. Not just the idea that God exists. But the awareness that God is already here. Already sustaining. Already breathing life into us. So this week, try something simple. When you notice your breathing, pause for just a second. Breathe in and remember: God is giving me life. Then breathe out and remember: God is giving life through me. And maybe, little by little, we start seeing the world differently. Maybe we become more patient. More compassionate. More courageous. More alive. Because the Spirit we've been searching for may already be as close as the air we breathe.