

The Breath of God

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- [0 : 00] May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen. A few days after Valentine's Day, the flowers are still relatively fresh, the cards are possibly up, or you're maybe still waiting for them. I'm not sure.
- But there is a surprising amount of heart talk I'm now reading from the prophet Jeremiah. There is talk about the heart that turns away from the Lord.
- There is talk about the heart being deceitful above all things and desperately corrupt and hard to understand. There is talk about the heart being tired.
- It is honest. It is faithful. Is it true? Is it comprised of love? In the ups and downs of life, do we follow our heads or our hearts or a mixture of both?
- Do we think too much without feeling? Or do we feel too much without thinking? How do we cope with the ups and downs of life, the blessings and the woes?
- [1 : 28] Jeremiah stood in the midst of a time of transition. His career as a prophet began in the shadow of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. It ended in a time of exile.
- Having lost his home with the others when the holy city was conquered and destroyed by the Babylonians, he was finally forced to flee to Egypt, most likely against his will by those who had remained to the end in Jerusalem.
- Jeremiah had seen it all coming and counseled the people to surrender or be destroyed. Exile was to be the new normal.
- How would the people respond? As if they lived in a desert? Or would they be planted in this strange world like trees rooted next to a flowing river?
- Only one response would indicate faithfulness and trust. In times of great change and transition, it is not easy and not always easy to remain faithful.
- [2 : 39] In his heart talk, Jeremiah talked about those whose hearts would turn away from God. He likened them to a shrub in the desert, constantly searching for water that could never be found.
- What would be the modern equivalent? The search for wealth? For material goods? For fame amidst the abundance of choices we face in daily living?
- Not that everyone is living a quiet or noisy desperation life outside the church, but how many beyond our doors are searching and searching for something and not finding it?
- Or working and working and working and not finding rest? Might that be what we, with our words and our music, our hospitality and welcome, our busy activities and the quieter times of reflection and services like these have to offer?
- In the ups and downs of life, in the unexpected upset, in the moments of blank boredom, in the frenetic activity, is this place, let's use the old word sanctuary, is this place one where ups and downs can be put into perspective?

- [4 : 13] an encouragement be given, and hope found, as people have the opportunity to draw breath. During lockdown, when we could not meet together, I remember sharing a breathing exercise that is sometimes used with anxious people.
- Breathe in for one, and out for one. Breathe in for two, and out for two.
- Breathe in for three, and out for three, and in for four, and out for four, up to five, and then out for five.
- But don't try any more than that, or we'll need to dial 999, or alert the undertakers. Breathe easily, and gently. The point is that there is something in the mindful control of breathing that changes the rhythm of life, and perspective is altered.
- In the ups and downs of life, in the sanctuary of this place, focusing on breathing, and know that the Hebrew word for spirit is breath, we bring God in.
- [5 : 37] We turn away, not from God, but from the parched places, and wilderness, the uninhabited land, salted by tears, towards something more hopeful, more life-affirming, more God.
- What a curse it is, not to leave room for the spirit of God, breathing in our lives. What a woe it is, to rely only on our own strength, and ingenuity, and not find encouragement from those around us, and from God.
- Are you dry of hope? Dry of blessing? Dry of opportunity, and imagination? Dry of love?
- In the ups and downs of life, where are you today? We live in a world of seeming prosperity, yet we also live in a world that does not always feel, or look right.
- I cannot get out of my mind those long lines of exiled children, women, and men, walking out of their refugee camps in Gaza, and back into the ruins of their city, their town, and their homes.
- [7 : 04] No proper house over their heads, but yet another tent, as they sit in the rubble of what had been their homes. And the threat of inhumane billionaires, to exile them again, to other refugee-laden lands, so that bombed Gaza, may rise from ruins to be a playground, for the gaudy, well-heeled, and their golden towers.
- And Ukraine, and its ongoing agony, whose fate seems to lie in the hands of a tyrant, and a populist. These are the parched places, and the wilderness. The uninhabited lands salted by tears, alongside many others today.
- The ups and downs. Jeremiah knew about, all about living with ups and downs. He painted word pictures of impending doom and gloom.
- Life as a desert, and therefore a desperate struggle. None is excluded from the dark places. Our stories still are rooted somehow in these ancient stories of Israel.
- It is into those stories, and ours, that God came, and still comes, to test minds, and search hearts, and show us, another way.
- [8 : 34] God has not made us to be parched, and live in desert lands, with dry roots. God wants us to be like trees, planted by water, with roots finding the stream, and living without fear, when the heat comes, and leaves remaining green, and not being anxious, in the time, where there is a drought of hope, and not ceasing, to bear hope, and fruit.
- God wants us to put down, deep roots in his love, and care, and strength, and perseverance. God wants us to endure, the ups and downs, of life, with the help of others, with the help of God.
- To see that we are not alone, and that there are people out there, there is God out there, on our side, in the desert, in the down times of life, to help us up again, gradually, until we can stand, and walk, and in our turn, help others.

The God who tests our heart, is not to be feared, but to be trusted. Are you for God yet? Jeremiah paints an image, of a tree, planted by water.

Trees teaches about life, with and without God. The tree can be an image, of humanity, gone awry. It was a tree's fruit, that tripped Adam and Eve, in the poetry of Eden.

[10 : 13] But the tree is also, the fulcrum of our salvation, or our rescue, from the curse, and the woe. Jesus bore the woe, and the curse of crucifixion, on a tree, so we could be grafted, onto the tree of God, of God's people, where we can be clean, and safe, and free.

This is the hope, dangling in front of us, today. This is why God, tests your heart. Not to make you afraid, but to help you trust God.

Jesus, in a different time, also talks about, blessings and woes, ups and downs. Matthew sets this collection, of sayings in a high place.

We know it as the, Sermon on the Mount. For Luke, mountains are for prayers, and encounters with God. Luke sets Jesus' collection, of sayings, on a plain, where the people are gathered, to hear Jesus' collection, to hear him, and to be healed, of their infirmities, and afflictions.

Addressing those, who wanted to follow Jesus, these words of, ups and downs of life, are a call to action. Not an attempt, to spell out, a discreet, Christian theology.

[11 : 43] The God of the prophets, is speaking through Jesus. The blessings, and woes, challenge us, to ask what it is, that we value, and what it is, that we reject, in relation to being, faithful, Christian, living.

God's values, are different, from the world's values. Jesus' belief, is that the poor, and the hungry, the weeping, and the persecuted, know their dependence, on God, more than the rich, and the replete, the laughing, and the receiving, of fawning compliments.

Is it that Jesus, is asking each one of us, what are the things, that are getting in the way, of your closeness, to God? Jesus speaks, on a level place, on a plane, but he is also speaking, plainly.

Jesus is on the level, speaking directly, to us. His purpose, is to examine our lives, in much the same way, as Jeremiah spoke, of God, testing our hearts.

What do we have, to climb over, get around, wade through, go under, or to get beyond, and get to God?

[13 : 02] Are our roots, deep in God's, living water, so that our ethics, and morality, our treatment of others, and our priorities, in life, are rooted in him?

Or have we turned away? The God Jesus, speaks of, is not always, the God we proclaim. Our human inclination, is to fit God, into our small definitions, cultures, and places.

But God, always breaks down, the barriers, we construct, to keep God out. God always calls us back, to his way. To take God's blessing, seriously, is to go against, the grain of the world.

to ride against, the tide. Jesus plainly, advises us, that the only way, to survive the ups, and downs of life, is to choose God.

To reorient, relationships, and reverse social, economic, and political, injustices, so that we gain rights, standing in the eyes of God. To demonstrate, by how we choose, to live, and treat others, that we have chosen God.

[14 : 15] At last, again, and always, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Amen. Amen.