

“Sighing”

Romans 8:22-27

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A few weeks ago *I had ... a day.*

The kind of day that feels like a string of one thing after another. It started with small things: coffee leaking out of my mug, a phone that wasn't charged, paperwork that took too long and conversation that didn't get long enough.

Finally, I got home. We didn't have everything we needed for dinner so

I walked to QFC to slow down my mind and grab an onion and two limes.

When I went to check out, I reached in my pocket only to find that I had no credit card, no way to pay for my items. I closed my eyes and I heaved a deep sigh, exhausted and exasperated by the day. Then I apologized to the checker and walked back home.

I'm not sure if my apology was for leaving my produce at the front or for the pained sigh I left him with. Likely both.

When I was young, I learned that sighing was rude. I'm sure that I came by that lesson honestly.

“Kristy, pick up your room.” (deep breath) *sigh*

“Kristy, stop reading a book, it's time for dinner.” (deep breath) *sigh*

“Kristy, you can't do that thing just because your older brothers do ...” (deep breath) *sigh*

As a young person, I heard adults complain about the sighs from angsty teenagers and our lack of communication skills. Taking offense to this, I tried to use my words instead, buying into the idea that a sigh was rude and I should avoid it. It was just recently that I read fairly new research out of UCLA and Stanford talking about the importance of sighing.¹ Sighing, it turns out, isn't rude. It is, in fact, an essential action our brain signals to our lungs to keep our lungs fully inflated. There are times when our bodies need to sigh, when we hold onto breath, closed off for all sorts of reasons. There are even times that without sighing we could be in danger of our lungs failing us.² A sigh can help inflate the part of our lungs where carbon dioxide and oxygen are exchanged. Sighing increases the oxygen—the life—in our bodies, opening us up to the air and life around us. It's like a biological reset button, bringing on a feeling of relief.

With all these great benefits, it seems like a *wise* move for us to pause and try sighing together. *I promise, I won't feel offended.* You can make it a sigh of relief if

you came in here holding your breath for some reason. Or an exasperated sigh if you hate an interactive sermon. Whatever works for you.

Take a deep breath and then ...*sigh*

And again ... deep breath and then ...*sigh*

There are so many reasons in our lives and in the world for which we may need to stop and sigh. It's what my body did involuntarily when I first read about Robb Elementary School two weeks ago. It often how I feel as get home after a long day, when I'm worried about someone.

Sometimes I don't realize how much I'm holding my breath, waiting for *something, waiting for some sign of relief of good new or hope, just waiting to exhale.*

I wonder how often the early church felt like they were holding their breath as I read a passage like the one we have today. Paul is writing to the church in Rome, faithful people waiting for the world to be set right. People who looked out on their community and witnessed personal pain and broken systems, who saw grief and injustice taking root. He describes the whole of creation—the earth and land AND the people—groaning in pain for new life to spring forth. Addressing their pain, he reminds them of God's promise to them. He reminds them of the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit.

There is this line in Romans, this beautiful promise, that the Holy Spirit who is present with us here, now, always, will intercede on our behalf with ***sighs too deep for words. INTERCEDE ... with sighs too deep for words.*** That is a promise of God that we don't talk about *nearly* enough: God *sighs* on our behalf.³

God sighs.

For us.

God sighs for us when we are not getting enough oxygen. When we feel weak and light-headed.

God sighs for us when hope seems lost. When the next step seems unknown.

When we Just. Want. To. SCREAM!

God sighs for us when it feels like *everything* is collapsing around us and we need a path forward. God sighs for you and for me.

God does not sigh because God struggles for air ... God breathes just fine. The breath of God is steady and present. This sigh is for us. And for all of creation. And it has a name—the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit, who has been present since the beginning, who gathered the church together at Pentecost and gathers us still today, who moves in and among us now, creating and renewing, challenging and comforting. Interceding in our lives with sighs too deep for words, sighs that open up our lungs AND our hearts and minds.

This isn't the only place we see someone sighing in scripture.

There is a story of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark where a group of people bring a deaf man to Jesus, hoping Jesus could help him to hear and to speak. Jesus then looks to heaven and he sighs. He sighs and he says, “be opened.” Immediately the man could hear and could speak. A sigh is meant to open something up in us.

The Spirit intercedes on our behalf with sighs too deep for words. I wonder what needs to be opened up for you and for me this day?

Since 2020, it seems like much of our conversations have been about closing things down. These closures were all about safety as we navigated a world that was so uncertain. Yet as we closed school buildings and theatres and libraries and sanctuaries and physical structures where we go to, *I have heard from many people who have expressed feeling emotionally closed off to the world.*

It doesn't take a pandemic to do this.

We can find ourselves closed off from the world in all sorts of situations and for all sorts of reasons. It can happen because we are exhausted. Or misunderstood. We can close ourselves off because we don't want to explain ourselves. Or we are holding onto a grudge. Or we've been hurt. It could be anxiety. Or the weight of the world. Maybe feeling a little distant or closed off others is not even something we recognize.

I was born and raised in this area and think that we are lovely humans in the Pacific Northwest, BUT I am also aware that the Seattle area has a reputation for being unwelcoming, dating back to the 1920s. It's called the Seattle Freeze, the idea that those of us who live in this area are closed off from meeting new people, from building new relationships. Maybe we don't even notice when we have closed ourselves off. But once we close ourselves off, it's hard to open again on our own, open ourselves up to people, to ideas, to hope, or to new paths. That is what the Spirit moves in to do. That is the gift of the Holy Spirit this day.

Are there things that feel closed to you in life and in this world? Is there an ending where you long for a beginning? Where are you praying for new life? The Spirit intercedes with sighs that go beyond our words.

And what happens next cannot be mapped out.

God sighs for us, opening our lungs and our lives to something bigger, and then our lives change.

* * *

Last summer, in a neighborhood on the North Side of Chicago, Carmen Cruz was thinking about her 13-year-old son Nikolas and how much he loves baseball. Carmen is a single mom who so wants to give her kid everything, but she can't play baseball. At all. In fact, she is deeply scared of being hit by the ball.

Her son Nikolas loves the game but needed someone to help him practice to have a chance to make his middle school team, to keep up his skills in this pandemic summer.

Knowing that she couldn't be this person for her son, Carmen went to social media and posted on her neighborhood page:

“Looking for any baseball-oriented individuals.
I suck as a parent for even asking this
but my son needs a little help honing his baseball skills
and I'm soooo afraid of getting hit with the ball again.
Anyone willing to throw the ball with him 1 day a week please let me know.
He's a really cool 13-year-old!”

Carmen believed that she was a bad mom for reaching out to ask. For seeking help on behalf of her kid. But her willingness to reach out led to them meeting Ashvin Lad, a neighbor up the street who had experience coaching baseball. Ashvin figured that throwing a ball after work would be a great way to wind down his day and be a good neighbor.

They started playing catch in the park after school with Carmen cheering them on. They talked strategy. They went to the batting cages. And they became friends.

Carmen shares that their family had been in a really hard place after the death of her older son. That it was hard to learn how to reach out. But meeting Ashvin feels like a God send. And Ashvin feels the same way, delighted to share a game he loves with a kid who made space in his heart for it.⁴

It can be hard to open ourselves up.

You and I have **countless** reasons right now, good reasons, to close ourselves off from the world, from new ways of being, from new relationships, from new hope. Countless reasons to hibernate and hunker down and make our worlds and our lives smaller. But today we celebrate Pentecost, where the Spirit moves in with wind, and fire, and languages and *sighs too deep for words*, and changes everything.

The day God's Spirit OPENS up the CHURCH and brings together unlikely people, to be a people together. We are called to be God's people in the world. As the church, with one another. To proclaim hope. And peace. And love. To hold the hands of those who are struggling. And weep with those who weep. To seek out justice with our voices and our action. To BE God's people in this world.

This work is made possible by a God who sighs. With us. And for us. Opening up our breath and our lives. It's a promise we don't remember *nearly enough*.

God sighs.

For me and for you.

Amen.

Notes

1. Mary Grace Garis, *Well and Good Magazine*, June 7, 2019, <https://www.wellandgood.com/meaning-of-sighing/>

2. Fiona MacDonald, *Science Alert*, “Sighing is Actually Life-Saving,” February 18, 2016, <https://www.sciencealert.com/scientists-discover-that-sighing-is-actually-a-life-saving-biological-function>

3. The Reverend Lucinda Isaacs gave me the idea of writing a sermon on God sighing for this Sunday. She and I worked on this sermon together, sharing ideas and stories as we talked through this text for Pentecost.

4. Heidi Stevens, *Chicago Tribune*, June 16 2021, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/columns/heidi-stevens/ct-heidi-stevens-boy-needed-someone-to-play-catch-cubs-game-0616-20210617-2nmx-spyahndhfov4vndj6jpmjm-story.html>