

April 14, 2024

Thriv'era | We Are...Spirited

Pastor Paul Gauche

For as long as I can remember, our family has flown kites on Easter Sunday. It's as much a part of our Easter celebration as our favorite foods like lamb, ham, cheesy potatoes, and mimosas. If it's not raining or snowing, we'll fly kites on Easter. The kite is a common symbol used in many cultures worldwide during the seasons of Lent and Easter. For example, in Haiti, Monte Kap is the word for kite, which means 'to be lifted up.' Haitian children fly kites at Easter as visual symbols of hope and promise, often scarce in their daily context. Haitian kites are not usually made of beautifully colored material but from plastic grocery bags, sticks, string, and a stone with a hole to weigh it down. In Greece and Cyprus, children associate kite flying with Lent. In Grenada, kites are flown on Good Friday. In Guyana, kites are flown as an activity by all ethnic and religious groups and were probably imported by Chinese plantation workers nearly 3000 years ago. They have always been a symbol of spring. This practice draws people together as kites appear in the sky in the weeks leading up to Easter, and school children are taken to parks and taught to fly them. This culminates in an airborne celebration on Easter Monday. Flying kites symbolize the Risen Christ and are, in some sense, being Monte Kap — lifted up!

Today, whether or not there is a religious or spiritual connection, kite flying on Easter and during the Easter season is a common practice of welcoming spring and acknowledging the animating power of the wind. The simple joy of watching something as inanimate as a piece of paper, plastic, or fabric stretched over a crossbeam of wood become animated by something invisible creates a deep sense of inspiration and enthusiasm for young and old alike. The sight of kites flying in the breeze becomes a visual reminder that, as children of God, we are spirited human beings; the power of the Holy Spirit animates us. We thrive as spirited people by acknowledging that we are inspired, animated, and enthused by the Source of all life and that every breath is a gift.

We're continuing our Easter Season series with Thriv'era. Thriv'era is a fusion of two familiar

words: 'thrive' and 'era.' Our intention is to explore what it means to thrive in this and every moment of our lives. We acknowledge that thriving does not happen apart from the challenges of life; rather, thriving is what takes place at the intersection of the resurrection of Christ and our daily lives. For the next several weeks, we'll be walking into this transformational experience together toward a deepened sense of our identity, purpose, vision, and mission as a community of Christ Followers who are spirited, creative, and connected people, called to be present, grateful, generous, and missional with our lives. These seven thriving rhythms will shape our thinking about what it means to be the people of God who are shaped by the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ as we bring some good to each moment, something better to each day, and our best to each other as we encounter the world around us. Last weekend, we did an overview and explored the theme: "We Are Thrivers."

Today, we're exploring the first of the seven thriving rhythms: We Are Spirited. If you're using the companion book "Welcome The Seasons, Thriv'era," you'll spend some time each day reflecting on what it means to thrive as spirited people by affirming that we are inspired, animated, and enthused by the Source of all life and that every breath is a gift. This is all about breath. We acknowledge that, as image bearers of the Divine, we are "breathed into life" and sustained in life by the power of the Holy Spirit. In the scriptures, the words "Spirit" and "breath" are the same word. To understand this, we must go all the way back to the book of Genesis. In chapter 2:7 [with 4-6, paraphrased], we see all of God's creative energy's thriving rhythms culminating in the creation of humankind. The story of humankind begins with the breath of God, which is Spirit. Let me read this short passage and then show you a couple of things. *"After God had created the heavens and the earth, day and night, water, land, trees, plants, large animals, small animals, sea creatures, cattle, reptiles, bugs, and fish – then the LORD God formed the [hu]man from the dust of the ground. God breathed the [Spirit] breath of life into the [hu]man's nostrils, and the [hu]man became a living [Spirited] person."*

There's so much going on here. I want us to hold on to three things: Breath is Spirit, Spirit is life, Life is gift.

Breath is Spirit

The passage from Genesis is just spectacular. It paints a precious image. Did you catch it? Let your imagination recreate the scene: God, after creating the heavens and the earth, day and night, water, land, trees, plants, large animals, small animals, sea creatures, cattle, reptiles, bugs, and fish – God creates us... The LORD God kneels down and gathers a handful of soil, looks at it, holds it, and then forms the [hu]man from the dust of the ground. And then God breathes the breath [Spirit] of life into the nostrils of the [hu]man, and the [hu]man became a living, spirited person." Breath and Spirit: Breath breathed from God's lungs into our lungs fills us with God's Spirit.

This is rooted deeply in the scriptures. Two passages in the oldest book of the Bible, the Book of Job, remind us that God's breath creates, sustains, and connects us to God, the Creator. For about 98% of the story, Job struggles. He's lost everything. Everyone around him tries to convince him that either God hates him and has it out for him or that he must have done something to deserve all of it. But Job isn't having any of that. He's thriving in the midst of all of this because he knows that no matter what, he's connected to the God who has created and sustains him. In Job 27: 3, he says, *"...as long as I live, while I have breath from God, I refuse to say one word that isn't true..."* Not long after that, in 33:4, Job says, *"The Spirit of God has made me; the breath of the Almighty gives me life."*

In the book of Acts, The Apostle Paul is in Athens, Greece. He's teaching people about God's nearness—that God isn't out there somewhere, in some remote place in the cosmos, disconnected from everything. Rather, God is here, with us, for us, in us, as close to us as the next breath. Paul says God is here, now, for us. "He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need."

In his remarkable book, "The Great Conversation," Belden Lane creates some context for us to fully appreciate the gift of breath. "Our first intense experience of the world comes through

breathing—gasping for air. For the rest of our lives, this happens automatically, without conscious effort, handled by a respiratory control center at the base of the brain. We breathe an average of 28,000 times a day. But breath is more than a physiological function. It represents an interior, spiritual dimension of a more-than-just-us life. According to ancient wisdom, God's breathing brought the first humans into existence, filling them with the "breath of life" (Genesis 2:7). Breath is a divine energy recognized across every religious tradition."

Each breath is a gift from the Creator. Thriv'era teaches us to consider that as our starting point. When we shift our thinking away from breath as something we take to breath as a gift we receive creates a deeper rhythm of thriving in our lives. As followers of Christ, we thrive as spirited people who are inspired, animated, and enthused by God, the Source of all life, and who understand that breath is Spirit.

Spirit is Life

You really don't know how precious the gift of Spirit-breath is until you don't have it. On Monday Night Football on January 2, 2023, an unprecedented tragedy occurred. With 5:58 remaining in the first quarter, Buffalo Bills safety Damar Hamlin collapsed on the field after tackling Bengals wide receiver Tee Higgins and suffering a cardiac arrest. The breath that was first breathed into him 24 years earlier on Wednesday, March 4, 1998, left his body. Moments later, Bill's athletic trainer, Denny Kellington, began CPR and, with the help of the medical staff, worked to revive Damar Hamlin as he received the first of a new lifetime of breath. One year later, Damar posted this on his social media platform: *"they say 'if you wanna hear God laugh just tell him your plans...' I couldn't even imagine the year I just had. Blessed & highly favored to make it into another year. Everything aligned for greatness in [the coming year] 2024."* Damar Hamlin shifted his thinking. He seems to be thriving. A lot.

As followers of Christ, we thrive as spirited people who are inspired, animated, and enthused by God, the Source of all life, and who understand that breath is Spirit, and that Spirit is Life.

Life is gift.

That is certainly the point of Damar Hamlin's story. In this first thriving rhythm, we're acknowledging that as followers of Christ, we thrive as spirited people who are inspired, animated, and enthused by God, the Source of all life, and who understand that breath is Spirit, that Spirit is life, and that life is a gift. I'd like to ask you to do something with me that just might be a gift for you as we prepare to take all of this into the week ahead.

I'd like to lead you in a really brief breath practice. Just for a moment or two, because I want to help you become aware of something that you may tend to miss, but that just might give you a sense of thriving in this moment. I'd like you to put both feet on the floor and place your hands on your lap and your arms on your legs. And now, if you are comfortable doing this, just gently breathe in and hold your breath for a moment, and then release it. Let's do that again. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Notice when you breathe in how your lungs expand and fill your chest. As you exhale, notice how your body softens. Let's do that one more time, and as you do so, gently close your eyes and let your breath return to its normal rhythm. Now, as you inhale, let me gently remind you of something important. We don't "take" a breath. I know that's how we usually talk about it. But because breath is a gift, and a gift is received, we don't take a breath; we receive a breath. We welcome a breath. We accept a breath. We absorb a breath. We don't take a breath. We receive a breath. As you just bring your attention to the rhythm of your breath, two passages. The first is from the ancient book of Job in the Hebrew scriptures. Job 33:4: "The spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life." You could recite the first part of that verse as you gather in your breath. Breathing in, you say: "The spirit of God has made me..." and then as you exhale, "And the breath of the Almighty gives me life... and more life."

Now, just before you open your eyes, I want you to consider this: the breath you just breathed in is a gift from God to you. God placed that breath within you. That breath you just breathed is a gift from the Creator of the Universe to you. That breath is a gift. And so is that one. And that one, too. Alright,

thanks. You can open your eyes. That, my friends, was a moment of thriving. The sensation of breathing in and out was an invitation to slow down and be here, now. It was also an invitation and considering it a gift is an invitation to thrive.

So, what does all of this have to do with thriving? When we connect the unconscious act of receiving a breath with the very conscious act of connecting that to God, there is a bit of thriving that begins to settle into our souls. I have breath in my lungs. And because God is the giver of breath, I am filled with God's Spirit. Because I am filled with God's Spirit, I am thriving. How do we make this practical?

Daily Breath Practice: Set aside a few minutes each day for a breath practice similar to the one described in the passage. Find a quiet and comfortable space to sit with both feet on the floor, hands on your lap, and arms on your legs. Take a few moments to focus on your breath, inhaling through your nose and exhaling through your mouth. Reflect on the idea that each breath is a gift from the Creator. Instead of thinking of it as something you take, consciously receive, welcome, and absorb each breath. Consider reciting a verse or affirmation, such as "The spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life... and more life." Embrace this daily practice as a moment of thriving, an opportunity to slow down, be present, and acknowledge the gift of life through your breath.

Reflective Journaling: Keep a reflective journal to explore the concept of Thriv'era and its seven thriving rhythms. After your daily breath practice, take a few minutes to journal your thoughts and feelings. Reflect on how acknowledging the gift of breath enhances your sense of thriving. Consider writing about moments in your day when you felt alive, inspired, or connected to a deeper source of life. Explore how the awareness of breath as a gift influenced these moments. Use the journal to answer the important questions posed in the worship series about identity, purpose, mission, and vision. How does the acknowledgment of breath as a gift shape your understanding of these aspects of life? Over time, track your personal growth, insights, and experiences as you intentionally embrace the thriving rhythms in your life.