

Sermon for October 9, 2022—“YHWH”

Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C—Texts: Isaiah 42:5-10; Exodus 3:1-15

Some words have the power to stop me in my tracks. They have a way of affecting me deeply, and changing the way I think about things; the way I look at life—sometimes even the way I think about God. Words I recently read, by Sandra Thurman Caporale, did that for me. I pray you are equally moved, as I read them for you now.

There was a moment when Moses had the nerve to ask God what his name was. God was gracious enough to answer, and the name God gave was recorded in the original Hebrew as YHWH. Over time we've arbitrarily added an “a” and an “e” in there to get YaHWeH, presumably because we have a preference for vowels. But scholars and Rabbis have noted that the letters YHWH represent breathing sounds, or aspirated consonants. When pronounced without intervening vowels, it actually sounds like breathing.

YH—inhale. WH—exhale.

So a baby's first cry, its very first breath, speaks the name of God. A deep sigh calls God's name, or a groan or gasp that is too heavy for mere words. Even an atheist would speak God's name, unaware that their very breath is giving constant acknowledgment to God. Likewise, a person leaves this earth with their last breath, when God's name is no longer filling their lungs.

So when we can't utter anything else, is our cry calling out God's name? Being alive means we speak God's name constantly. So, is it heard the loudest when we're the quietest?

In sadness, we breathe heavy sighs. In joy, our lungs feel almost like they will burst. In fear we hold our breath and have to be told to breathe slowly to help us calm down. When we're about to do something hard, we take a deep breath to find our courage.

When we think about it, breathing is giving God praise. Even in—especially in—the hardest moments! This is so beautiful and fills me with emotion every time I grasp the thought. God chose to give himself a name that we can't help but speak every moment we're alive. All of us, always, everywhere. Waking, sleeping, breathing, with the name of God on our lips.

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.