

Focus on the breath (John 20:19-31)

Jesus, fresh out of his own three-day *savasana*, breathes on the disciples.

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A couple of years ago I began teaching yoga classes at the church where I serve as associate pastor.

I wanted to weave the practice and philosophy of yoga with Christian spirituality in ways that were respectful of both traditions—something that has been done poorly as often as it's been done well. Mindful of the dangers of appropriation, I felt a deep calling to bring what I'd learned on my mat to bear on my ministry.

For an incarnational faith centered on a God who becomes flesh, Christianity has often lacked a robust physicality. Our worship is not totally bereft of verbs—we stand and kneel and eat, for instance—but a cursory glance at Christian history and tradition confirms that Christians don't always know what to do about our bodies.

Yoga, on the other hand, integrates body, mind, and spirit in a seamless whole. The tether connecting these is the breath. The *asana* poses of yoga are always secondary to the breath. The breath is the thing. Even strip mall yoga studios teach *pranayama* practices, different ways of breathing that calm the nervous system and focus the mind. These strategies can be as simple as belly breaths and as complicated as alternate nostril breathing (highly recommended for allergy season).

Not long after I began teaching in the colorful chiaroscuro of our stained-glass chapel, I invited the people present to take a deep inhale and a long, slow exhale.

They were splayed out on their mats in *savasana*, or corpse pose. The paradox struck me, how our bodies were in the shape of death while our lungs respired the musty air of the seldom-used space.

I contemplated what the scripture says about breath and its relation to life and to God. In the second Creation story, Adam only comes to life when God breathes into his nostrils.

The same thing happens in this first Pentecost story—not the fancy one with flaming tongues, but the simple one that happens in the privacy of the Upper Room. Jesus, fresh out of his own three-day *savasana*, breathes on them, giving them a new life—the Holy Spirit.

As my parishioners lay on their mats breathing, I was overcome by the magnitude of the metaphor. “Your inhale is God’s exhale,” I told them, and this is true. God is as close as our own breath. Just as we draw in the breath of life with each inhale, we are invited to receive the Spirit as intimately and palpably as a puff of air.