

Covenant Word

It Will Take Your Breath Away

Genesis 2:4b-7; II Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10

*A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
Jackson Shelton
Pastor
Sunday
October 7, 2007*

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting
to read and study these
thoughts more
carefully. Please know
that I do not take full
credit for anything that
may be contained
within, because I may
have read or heard
something at some point
during my pilgrimage
and do not remember
its source and thus,
cannot give the rightful
author his/her credit. I
pray that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.
Sarah Shelton**



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Covenant*

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Worship with us each Sunday
morning at 9 a.m. and
for Bible study at 10:30 a.m.

When the mail arrives at our house, it is easily sorted. The junk mail goes quickly in the recycle bin; the personal correspondence comes to me and the bills go to Lloyd. The catalogs, Better Homes and Gardens, and Southern Living are added to my stack and Sports Illustrated goes to Lloyd. While I am pretty consistent in making recipes or finding home improvements to share from my magazines, it is a rare occasion that Lloyd comes to me and says, "You really need to read this article in Sports Illustrated."

So he got my attention when he recently handing me Rick Reilly's signature column, Life of Reilly, which was entitled "Getting a Second Wind."

It seems that a family, the Shroyers, in Lynchburg, Virginia, had two daughters. The oldest, Korinne, was an eighth grade soccer goalie, saxophone player in the school band, and beautiful to behold. She, however, had started to feel sad for no apparent reason. Her parents took her to a therapist, who recommended that she take Paxil. One worry with Paxil is that it can give teenagers suicidal thoughts when they first start taking it. Korinne had taken the medication ten days when she came home after school one day, found her father's revolver in his closet and shot herself.

Korinne's body survived the shooting for six days. It was just long enough for her parents to decide that they would send out her organs like gifts. Her green eyes would go in one direction, her glad heart another, and her kidneys still another. Her liver and pancreas went somewhere else, and her two good lungs went to Gainesville, Georgia to a man named Len Geiger.

Len Geiger was 48 years old at the time. He had genetic emphysema known as Alpha-1. His only hope for survival was a lung transplant, and he had been on the waiting list for five years. With the gift of Korinne's lungs, his lung function went from 15% to above average for his age. His gratitude over a second wind, a second life, had him write Korinne's parents to say thank you.

Korinne's parents wrote back, and Geiger asked if they could all meet. At that meeting, the Shroyers gave Geiger a photo album of the girl whose life was now inside of him. "She starts out as this beautiful baby," Geiger says. "Then she's a little girl in a Halloween costume; then a gorgeous teenager. And then the pictures just stop. It was the saddest thing I have ever experienced."

As the group began to say their goodbyes, Korinne's mother took Geiger aside and asked if she could impose a favor on him. "Anything," Geiger said. "Can I put my hands on your chest for just a second?" And she stood there, crying, as she felt her dead daughter breathe one more time.

Reilly ends his article by asking, "Sometimes, life just takes your breath away, doesn't it?"

...Paul is a seasoned minister. He says that he is writing from prison and that he is suffering. Yet the knowledge of this younger man's vocational calling and what Paul remembers personally about Timothy is filling him with a second wind of hope and makes his suffering bearable.

I doubt that many of us will have such a dramatic experience as this, but I would imagine we all have had times when life has taken our breath

away in amazement and wonder.

I think that this is a little of what Paul is feeling as he writes to Timothy. By this time, Paul is a seasoned minister. He says that he is writing from prison and that he is suffering. Yet the knowledge of this younger man's vocational calling and what Paul remembers personally about Timothy is filling him with a second wind of hope and makes his suffering bearable.

Paul has been Timothy's mentor. He has instructed him from a young age, recognizing that Timothy's mother and grandmother have also left their fingerprints on the young minister's soul. The message behind these two letters is that Paul is so proud of this young man who has decided to give his life over to ministry that the wonder of it all takes his breath away. It is so tender a remembrance that Paul begins each letter by calling Timothy his "beloved son" and "child." He follows with gentle encouragement and strict instruction on how to best be a minister for Jesus Christ.

When I was ordained, words from the letters of Paul to Timothy were read to me by my father in the service. It was just three days after we had buried my mother, his beloved wife for almost 40 years. It was a moment that took my breath away. It was a foreshadowing of other moments that have occurred over these past twenty-five years of ministry that have taken my breath away as well.

While these tender moments took my breath away, there were others where I feared my breath had been literally knocked out of me.

My first baptism here was four months after I arrived. There were three men and one child waiting to be baptized. I suspect that many in this congregation were not so concerned about how I would get those three men under the water as they were about how I would bring them up out of the water, but no one said a word to me about it. I, however, was worried. Two were taller than me, and one was my height. So I put on my waders, assembled the men in my family and we got into the full baptistery to practice. It went so well I felt I could do it with my hands tied behind my back!

Sunday arrived. It was one of those raw January mornings when hats and gloves feel so good. It was so cold, that we put portable heaters in each of the robing rooms to keep the candidates warm. The four candidates arrived early, and I talked them through what would happen. Everyone was cooperative. Everyone was excited. Family members were coming, and we had a full house.

The time for the baptism arrived in the order of the service. I stepped into the water and immediately knew that something was wrong. As I stood in the baptismal pool to read the scripture, my legs began to go numb down inside my waders. As I brought each candidate into the water, I would whisper to them, "It is really ok if you want to re-schedule this." But their answer was the same, "No we can't, my Momma is here!"

I took the first one down under the water. He came up blowing and gasping. If I had been sitting in the congregation, I would have been thinking, "She'll do better with the next one." Each response got progressively worse until the fourth candidate came up flailing his arms and legs. The congregation must have thought I was drowning each one, but the truth of the matter was that the baptistery water heater had gone out during the night and the water was frigid. It was a baptism service that literally took their breath away!

Each Christmas, we receive a card with a picture of two children: Noah and Laura Burns. They are beautiful, happy children and would easily pass as biological brother and sister if I did not know better. You see, the parents could not get pregnant for the longest time. Finally, with the help of medical science, twins were conceived. But there were complications with the pregnancy. The babies were delivered prematurely. There wasn't much that could be done, so within a day's time, all the life supports were removed. Each parent held a baby and in NICU, we rocked those babies to eternal rest while singing "Jesus Loves Me." The couple had every reason never to attempt parenthood again, but the breath of God filled them with new possibilities. They adopted Noah, and then, lo, and behold, the Mom got pregnant and along came Laura. Sometimes, life just takes your breath away, doesn't it?

I think about the time I watched the Massai warrior dance with joy that his HIV/AIDS test came back negative. I think about the privilege of burying the dead, of joining two lives in marriage, and of visiting the sick.

I think about baptizing my own two children. I think about breaking the bread, hammering the nails, and washing

the feet of the Saints of God.

I think about seeing my face in Time magazine and the emails that came from all over the world written in languages unknown to me, but translated, usually, by a missionary, whose messages were, in essence, "You go, girl!"

And I remember getting into the car the night we ate with the Pastor's Calling Committee of this church and hearing my precious husband put his own fears and concerns aside to say, "I feel called!" when I could not voice anything but uncertainty.

While these tender moments took my breath away, there were others where I feared my breath had been literally knocked out of me. Like when my friend and attorney, Richard Smith, stood with me before an accusing Board of Deacons at a church where I had served effectively for eleven years.

Like when Fisher Humphreys accompanied me to a secret meeting of the Associational leadership so that I could hear that they believed most of the Association's ills was due to my presence as a pastor.

Or like the day that Todd Heifner sat in my library to listen to my conversation with the chairman of the Association's Membership Committee regarding the open membership of Baptist Church of the Covenant.

So when Paul invites Timothy to join him in his suffering, I understand what this is about. It is not the message that you might expect to hear on your ordination day, Alisha, with all of its excitement, pomp, and circumstance. But it is to suffering that Paul invites Timothy, and I join them by inviting you. Scripture is clear that the faithful must be ready to suffer, if necessary, to bear witness to the truth. It is a part of our calling as a believer, but it is definitely transmitted to the ordained through the apostolic tradition. It is only to those willing to suffer that they will receive the spirit of power, love and self-control that Paul mentions in his second letter to Timothy.

It is only to those willing to suffer that they will receive the spirit of power, love and self-control that Paul mentions in his second letter to Timothy.

Thomas Oden, in the Interpretation Commentary, says of these verses that these elements of power, love and self-control are complementary. They need one another in order to be the most effective. Our sense of power, then, needs to be directed, guided and shaped by love and self-control. If power lacks love, it becomes dangerous. If love lacks power, it has no lasting effect. And love that is empowered, needs a sound mind to monitor it so that it does not become wild and fruitless.

I believe that to recover the Christian tradition, we cannot

proceed into the future timidly. We must stir up this flame, this gift of God, this spirit of power constrained by love and guided by a sound mind, in order to continue sharing the good news of the gospel effectively and with integrity. This is especially true of you, Alisha, for just your presence as a white, educated, called, female will be enough to stir the waters of conflict.

What I hope you will remember at those times, however, is that while Timothy received his faith from a maternal line, so you are receiving a vision for ministry that has been passed through generations of men and women.

For Jesus offers us new life, new beginnings, and new breath. We experience this best when we come to this table and feast on the bread and cup remembering that Jesus promised He was the bread of life. It is here that we find sustenance and are filled in order to receive our second wind.

You did not arrive at this point without a biological family who planted seeds of faith nor did you arrive here without the help of imaginative, intelligent pioneer women in the ministry with independent minds and spirits. They were willing to take the risk to prepare the way for you, and other young women, to not just hear the call of Christ but to follow it. Just as faith was passed from Lois to Eunice to Timothy, so the courage to be a woman responding to the vocational call of God has passed from Addy Davis, the first Southern Baptist woman to be ordained, to Sarah Shelton, to April Robinson, to Renee Pitts to Alisha Damron.

To place our hands on you, then, and feel the breath of God fill your lungs, fills us with hope. For with you, Alisha, comes the fulfillment of the possibility that many of my sisters in ministry had tragically knocked out of them. It is the divine promise that women continue to be called in spite of adversity and opposition. Your lungs contain the breath that will sustain others with the good news of the gospel. Your lungs contain the breath that will help you speak a good word at the right time always underwritten with love and self-control. Do not underestimate the gift with which you have been entrusted.

My prayer for you is that the loving kindness of family, the gentle encouragement of friends and the amazing hospitality of congregations like Baptist Church of the Covenant will surround you all of your days of ministry. And when you feel like the breath has been knocked out of you that they will act as God and blow the living breath back into you.

Today's service, however, is not for Alisha alone, but it is for all of us. For Jesus offers us new life, new beginnings, and new breath. We experience this best when we come to this table and feast on the bread and cup remembering that Jesus promised He was the bread of life. It is here that we find sustenance and are filled in order to receive our second wind.

So come and receive the bread and the cup as a reminder of the life that Christ offers.

Come and lay your hands on Alisha to set her apart for ministry. Come and allow the significance and mystery of these ordinances to take your breath away.