Oh holy night the stars are not brightly shining because it is the night of our dear Savior’s death. Death’s dark shadow is not put to flight. It engulfs this church building tonight and you have willingly entered the valley of the shadow of death where Death is the other preacher.

We are at the place called the Skull; by no means is this afternoon tea at the Washington Duke Inn. But tonight, Jesus will have the last word. He speaks on his wooden deathbed and when he speaks, we have to listen. Many say that for pastors Holy Week is a hell of week because it’s a busy time in the liturgical season but it’s also true because tonight is hell. There’s lots of discussion about what hell is, if there’s a hell, who’s going to hell. Some say, “Hell is other people” (Jean-Paul Sartre). For introverts, hell is other people at breakfast. And if Duke loses in basketball tomorrow that will surely be hell incarnate. Tonight we are confronted with hell on earth. Tonight is the night we face death to see life for what it truly is. Didn’t you come to hear the truth?

When an innocent 1st century man is placed on crucified lockdown in the ancient near eastern prison industrial complex, we should be compelled to tell the truth. When we come to remember the funeral of God on a cross, what better time to tell the truth? This year we remember “Bloody Sunday” on the Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, 50 years ago. Tonight we remember bloody Friday where God incarnate is sacrificed on the altar of the world’s salvation more than 2000 years ago.

When “the sun’s light failed,” the Son of God still speaks. Jesus doesn’t let the darkness speak to him because he’s still the light of the world when all else grows dim. He speaks to the darkness. He goes to the grave with sparring words. Words of forgiveness in a world of retribution—“Father forgive them for they know not what they do.” Words of welcome in a hostile environment—“Today you will be with me in paradise.” Words of committal in a self-oriented society—“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” He approaches his last breath as God’s holy ventilator system is about to be turned off for three days. This isn’t the God of the Greek philosophers; this is the crucified God of those whose backs are up against a wall.

When you’re on your back, near your final breath and death, if you haven’t faced the truth up to that point, when will you do it? Face the truth, tonight, as death is a portal to the truth, the whole truth. I want to tell you nothing but the truth because the truth will set us all free. When I hear the words of Jesus, “into your hands I commend my spirit,” I commend my breath, I’m reminded of so many who say, “I can’t breathe.” Their breath has been taken away, not given away like Jesus. This is not the 1980s love song by the band Berlin—“Take My Breath Away.”

This is more like a bluesy eulogy for Eric Garner moaned to the tune of “I can’t breathe.” Breath has been snatched away from many and life has a chokehold on them as they lay on the ground helplessly straining to say with their last few breaths, “I can’t breathe.” Suffocated or asphyxiated by the weight of the world or a situation or a person. The cross you may bear crushes your body to bleed the breath of life out of you. “I can’t breathe.”

This week, on April Fool’s Day, a fool played a joke but it was an insensitive hateful act on Duke’s campus. A noose was hung on a tree on the Bryan Center Plaza, the same week Jesus hangs from his own lynching tree, recalling the words of jazz singer Billy Holiday:

Southern trees bear strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black bodies swingin’ in the Southern breeze,
Strange fruit hangin’ from the poplar [Duke blue] trees.

“I can't breathe.” That’s what students, faculty, and staff, are saying. Someone’s breath has been taken away by that foolish act or life circumstances or systems and structures that continue to perpetuate racial, economic, political, and gender oppression and discrimination. People can’t breathe so they use their fingers to type hashtags on Twitter to get their points across--#BlackLivesMatter because perhaps to some not all lives matter.

All of our religious facades should fade at the foot of the cross. Why continue to fake faithfulness when you are down to your last breath? Death may finally make you honest with yourself and others. A palliative nurse recorded the five most common regrets of the dying and one of them is: “I wish I’d had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.” When you are losing your breath, dying, you may actually find the life you’ve always wanted.

The cross reminds us that our way doesn’t work in the end. The cross reminds us how we treat other people sometimes even in the name of God or good religion. The cross reminds us that at times we make tradition or politics more important than people. The cross reminds us that sin needs to be crucified tonight. I said it in 2015. That s-word—sin, human brokenness, separation from God. Sin. We don’t talk much about it and we like to feel warm and fuzzy and free after the assurance of pardon and passing of the peace. But what does it really matter if we continue down the slippery slope of our shortcomings when we walk out the doors of the church and do not change and are not changed? The cross, the ancient Roman electric chair for criminals, calls us to name our sin of omission and commission at the feet of innocent Jesus. To name the ways we can’t breathe or more importantly the ways in which we have taken the breath away from others. The cross calls us to be open and honest and truthful like a child’s free spirit that causes them to ask their father, “Dad, why do you want to be a vegetarian? Did Mom make you? If she did, you don’t have to listen to her. She’s not your boss.” That’s brutal honesty and openness.

And it’s honest to say, “I can’t breathe” because perhaps we’ve been trying to do life on our own apart from the breath of God and have to be reminded of the words from Deuteronomy, “Do not say to yourself, “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth” (Deut 8:17). If we haven’t figured it out yet, our power and might, our way, our hand, have not worked out so well. “Houston, we have a problem.” We have a problem when we take the world in our own finite hands and play god. Then we end up with people who can’t breathe, choking from poverty and inadequate educational resources and systemic violence and bad political policies. We can’t breathe because we are our own life coach and don’t look elsewhere for guidance. When we try to do life on our own, we will eventually say to ourselves “I can’t breathe” because you can’t breathe on your own. You can’t do it on your own and if you try, you’re like poet Renato Rosaldo who mourns the death of his wife, Shelly, and says, “as if my right arm gone/what most sustained me gone.” Without breath, you and your life will be gone.

And it is not our breath in the first place. We are stewards of breath, not creators of breath. The same spirit that anointed Jesus to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor is the same spirit or breath, Jesus commits back to God. “I commend my spirit.” Jesus gives his breath back to God, the fons vitae, the fountain of life, the one from whom all breath flows, the one who breathes life into all creation. It may seem as if God on the cross can’t breathe or the one who gives breath is about to lose his breath, but when Jesus commits his breath to God, God gives the breath of his life to us that he may live in and through us. Jesus gave his breath to God that God might breathe in us. Jesus committing his breath is a sign of God’s commitment to us.
Those who can’t breathe can be assured that Jesus gives his breath that we might breathe fully again. He gives up his spirit, his life, his power that we might be empowered to do what he did in the world. “This is the air I breathe/This is the air I breathe/Your holy presence living in me.” The Holy Breath of God can fill you, whether your breath fails by choice or not. Like air that fills a hot air balloon, God’s breath will cause you to fly and mount up with wings like eagles and rise higher than you've ever been before even out of the grave you've dug for yourself.

It may be dark all over the whole land but God does some of God’s best work in the dark. So in the dark tonight, if you find yourself struggling to breathe, I commend to you the words of Jesus—“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit”—as an encouragement to commit your breath, your life, to the one who gives you eternal life. Jesus’ words are a prayer from the Psalms in which one entrusts himself to God’s care and demonstrates his faith in a sovereign God whom he believes can rescue him. If you say that prayer, you acknowledge a deep faith in God’s breath of life and affirm that there is one, beyond yourself, beyond your world, holding the world. In saying this prayer, there is a deep yearning for communion with God by placing your spirit in God’s hands. It is a desire for community, a desire to not be alone in death or life.

In a recent Time magazine article, researchers stated that loneliness could be the next big public health issue. The first two words of that article are “loneliness kills” because there is an increase in the risk of death, whether one is objectively isolated, that is, socially disconnected, or subjectively lonely, meaning the feeling of loneliness. In saying this prayer, you commit yourself to not being alone but in the presence of God who wants you to breathe again.

On this dark night “blacker than a hundred midnights/down in a cypress swamp”(James Weldon Johnson) it’s important to remember that, in the midst of darkness, God is still present because the tearing of the curtain temple into two is a sign of the unleashing of God’s presence into the world and into your life. God breathes life into the world even when Jesus exhales his final breath. His last breath is our first as he gives birth to us as his new creation.

If you commend your breath into the hands of our living God, you offer it into wounded hands that are familiar with the bumps and bruises of our earthly life. As poet Mary Oliver writes,


| It’s not the weight you carry |
| but how you carry it - |
| books, bricks, grief - |
| it’s all in the way |
| you embrace it, balance it, carry it |
| when you cannot and would not, |
| put it down. (‘Thirst’) |

This is a call to carry life lightly because you have to let it go. “Into your hands, God, I commend my spirit. The world’s weight and darkness is too much for me. I need you God. I can’t breathe. I need your breath. I can’t do it alone anymore. I’ve come to the end of the road, the end of myself, my power, and my breath. I have to give over myself to death that I might truly breathe and live and have communion with You, once and for all. Precious Lord, take my hand, I’m tired, I’m weak, I’m worn. I can’t breathe and I want to breathe again.”

This committal resists the tide of the “veneration of the independent self” in our society in which we praise independence and individual power and stamina. Committing yourself to God is the implicit recognition that “[loss of independence] is as inevitable as the sunset”(Atul Gawande). When the sun’s light fades into the darkness of the night,
I encourage you with the words of J.S. Bach from his *St. Matthew Passion*:

Commend your way  
*And whatever troubles your heart*  
To the most faithful care of him  
Who controls the heavens.  
*He who gives clouds, air, and winds*  
Their paths, course, and track,  
He will also find paths  
Where your feet can walk.

When you declare “into your hands” you recognize like the spiritual, “He’s got the whole world in his hands,” including you. So “Hold to (his hand), God’s unchanging hand; Hold to (his hand), God’s unchanging hand; Build your hopes on things eternal, Hold to God’s unchanging hand.” Then you’ll be able to declare with confidence, “I know that I can make it. I know that I can stand. No matter what may come my way, my life (my spirit, my breath) is in your hands” (Kirk Franklin).