

April 14, 2024

John 20:19-23

“Breathing In The Risen Jesus”

Today we go back to the beginning – back to the book of Genesis and the first moments of the story of the creation of the heavens and the earth, when we are told that waters covered the face of the deeps. The breath of God blew across the waters, and God separated the water from the dry land. I imagine great tsunamis of water crashing and writhing in the process, as land is raised, and the wind blows, and the entire earth is being formed. It is, if not a cosmic moment, then at least a solar moment as this earth we are gifted to live on is created and set in motion around the sun. Likely there were moments of quiet ripples and sparkling bursts of reflected sunlight dancing across the waters as the breath of God gently blew across places like Cranberry lake and ponds and puddles. These are all instances of huge significance.

It is not long before the breath of God is shared once again, according to the Genesis story of creation. Now instead of a cosmic creator shaping the planet, we have an intimate God tenderly fashioning humanity from the earth, and then sharing the breath of life with the new creation, bringing forth humanity in God’s own image, created both male and female. It is a tender moment of blessing, as human beings experience the indwelling of God’s life-giving spirit within them, in a creation that surrounds and supports them.

Later in the scriptures, it is the same breath of God, those same mighty winds of God’s spirit that blow across the waters once again, this time blowing across the Red Sea, parting the waters and allowing the formerly enslaved Jewish people to escape from their captivity and cross on dry land. There are various scientific explanations for why the Jewish people could cross and the Egyptians could not – the most likely contributing factor was that the war Chariots and horses were too heavy to stay on top of the crust of dried soil that the Hebrews were able to run across. When the breath of God’s spirit is withdrawn, the waters return to their place once again. We are reminded in this story that the same breath of God that shaped the creation and gave life to humanity continues to be active in the world.

In the time of the prophets the prophet Ezekiel the prophet is taken to a dry valley full of bones, the result of a great war which apparently decimated the Jewish people. God asks Ezekiel if the bones of his people can live again, and Ezekiel replies that of course, no one but God really knows that answer. In response, the breath of God, the Spirit of God, blows across the valley and Ezekiel has the vision of the bones being raised up to new life, new vitality, and new hope as a result of receiving the breath of God. In this instance, Ezekiel himself is to take part by speaking words of exhortation to the bones and encouraging them to remember the blessings of God, and God’s promises. When he does this, the bones come back to life in a new act of creation like the first creation story, the breath of God living in people once again. This is the same breath of God that blew across the face of the waters in the beginning.

Do you have a sense of where this is all heading? This brings us all to Jesus, who was present in the first moments of creation according to the writer of John’s gospel. In John chapter one we read that “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. The world was created in and through the power of the breathed out word, and that word is Jesus, who is filled with the power of God’s Spirit. Jesus consistently shares that power in limited ways with his disciples, the sick, the needy, the hungry, the mentally ill, and offers hope, peace, power, and forgiveness to the world throughout his time of ministry on earth.

Now, in the reading for today, Jesus is risen and is ready to share the power of the Spirit, the breath of God, the same breath of God that drew forth dry land from the chaos of creation, the same breath of the Spirit that indwells all of humanity giving us life, the same breath of hope and promise that rescues people from their oppression, and give hope even to those who believe that they are nothing more than dry bones. That same spirit, Jesus breathes upon the disciples, giving them hope and promise for the future. I have no doubt that when they began to think about the implications of having received the breath of God's spirit from Jesus, the disciples began to remember all of his teachings, and the teachings of the Temple and Synagogues and the teachings of their own history, and realize that God's Spirit was continuing the work of creation, salvation, and redemption in powerful ways through them as well.

Lo these many years ago Diane and I had children, and when they were born they gasped for air, and began to cry, and the breath of life rushed into them – a special gift from God that has continued to sustain them these years. So it was for each of us as well, the Spirit of God, the breath of God, indwells us as long as we have life. God is that close to us. God is as near to us as our very breath, if we are able to pay attention to that gift.

Mystics and saints over the centuries have tried to encourage all of us to slow down and listen to our own breathing. Physical therapists, doctors, nurses, psychiatrists, and well-meaning neighbors all tell us things when we are anxious, things like, "Just take a couple of deep breaths and relax, everything is going to be all right!" And when we do, when we intentionally take in the breath of God's spirit through the air we breathe, then we tend to get better. We do better when we are filled by the Spirit of God, than when we try and get by on our own. It is not a coincidence that having been formed by God we become anxious when we are away or withdrawn from the presence of God in our innermost being.

The breath of the Spirit that Jesus breathed upon the disciples in that locked room that had been so full of fear brought them peace, power, strength, wonder, awe, and a sense of purpose and commitment. God's breath is still blowing in the world today, bringing people hope, and empowering them for mission, ministry, and to become a blessing for one another. That same breath of promise and love is blowing in our lives, in our congregation, as we look to the future to see where we are being invited to go. Like the first disciples, we will not stay behind closed doors, rather we will open the doors of our church and go out into the world, and we will open our doors to welcome others to come and experience the wind of God's Holy Spirit with us in our worship and lives together.

One of the ways we know that God is still working in our congregation is that we have children who are eager to attend and take part and that, by and large, everyone is accepting of them. This is a sign that God is working here. Another sign is that we are doing outreach and care for others in the world, both through the works of our hands and the prayers of our hearts. This is one of the signs that the wind of the Spirit still blows across our waters. Yet another sign that God is breathing life into our church family is that there are people who want to become associated with us as full members. This is a sign that God's breath is still bringing resurrection and promise to us, and through us for our world.

I know some of you don't like to be told what to do, so take this request as a suggestion and don't do it if it troubles you in any way for any reason. God works in all of our lives differently, so don't worry if this suggestion doesn't work for you this morning, just know that we are doing this once as something to try, an experiment in opening ourselves to the breath of

God's spirit, the experience of the Holy in our lives.

I invite you to take a moment to become comfortable where you are sitting, perhaps with your feet flat on the floor. Consider placing your hands in a cupped position on your lap, with the palms up, open, and ready to receive. If you are comfortable trying it, you might even raise your hands a little higher and further forward, as if you were reaching out to receive a gift – in this case the gift of God's spirit. Your hands might be together, or apart, depending on what you are comfortable trying this one time.

Then close your eyes, and listen for the Spirit to speak to you in the silence for a few moments. .... I invite you to intentionally take a deep breath in through your nose, to hold it for a moment and then release it slowly. Do this a couple of times, and feel what a blessing it is to have the spirit of God at work so closely within you. Let's begin. (allow time for this)

Gracious and merciful God, throughout history you have shared your life and living presence with us. This day we give you thanks and praise for the time to experience your power and love intentionally at work within us. As we continue to go about our days, let us always remember that it is through your eternal spirit that we are sustained, and give you thanks and praise. In the name of the one who shared your spirit with the disciples, and with us, we pray. Amen.