

Detail:

4-19-20 Sermon "With Glad Hearts"

I don't want to use the words *strange* or *weird* to describe Holy Week and Easter this year, but it was certainly different wasn't it? But even as it was different, it was also biblical. The first disciples were homebound on Easter as well for the most part. Not out of fear of a virus, but out of fear of arrest - out of fear of meeting the same fate as what they had witnessed with Jesus. They were afraid, and with good reason.

And when the women returned from the tomb and told the disciples what they had witnessed, I don't think it alleviated that fear at all - I think initially it confused them more than anything. What did all of this mean?

How could this be? Whatever was going on was certainly different for them, out of the ordinary, but it would prove critical to understanding what Jesus called them to do and to be as his followers.

In our series for the season of Eastertide, "The Heart of the Matter," our theme scripture that we looked at just briefly early in the service today, comes from Acts 2, and is from the Pentecost reading. Here again these words:

“Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.”
(Acts 2: 46-47a)

In fact, the four movements of this passage will become the four movements of our worship time over the coming weeks - you'll notice them as the major headings in your worship folder: Spending Time; Breaking Bread; Praising God; Having Goodwill. This series will end on Pentecost Sunday, so this passage will guide us forward during the entire Easter season, even as we explore different scriptures each week.

Our Gospel reading today from John takes place on that first Easter Sunday. The disciples, in self-isolation and practicing social distancing from the Roman authorities are surprised when they find Jesus suddenly standing among them. And he says to them, “Peace be with you.” And after showing them his hands and his side, lest there be any doubt that it is him, he says again, “Peace be with you. As God sent me, so I am sending you.” And then it says, he breathed on them saying “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

What a scene! Can you imagine? Today, if Jesus suddenly appeared in our locked homes and breathed on us we'd all be scrambling to put on our homemade masks and wiping down everything with Clorox wipes! But since Jesus has said he wants us to feel peace, let's talk about peace.

As you have gone about your days during this past week, what sights, sounds, words, or actions are things that act in your life as a “voice in your ear” that whispers to you, “Peace be with you?” Does that happen during a walk? Maybe while sitting on your porch or patio,

listening to the birds or in front of the fireplace? If you haven't experienced much peace, what do you have in your memory as something that brings you peace?

Lynn and I have been taking walks through the surrounding neighborhoods lately. On one walk last week we went through Otterbein Cemetery and found the grave of her aunt, Doris Metzger, who was a member here at Church of the Master years ago. That was peaceful both in the setting and in finally locating that grave that she wanted to find. I've been listening to more music lately, both jazz and classical, which always brings me peace. I started a book on meditation this week that I'm hoping, with time and practice, will also bring a kind of peace. So what are *you* doing? Why don't you drop me an email and let me know.

In Hebrew the word for both breath and spirit is *ruach*. And in Greek you have the same thing, one word, *pneuma*, that means both breath and spirit. And that's important to understand in light of this passage from John where Jesus offers them his peace and then breathes on them, telling them to receive the spirit. And we remember in the opening lines of the book of Genesis we're told that God's spirit, God's breath, hovered over the waters, right?

A few years ago I came across an article about breath that has really stuck with me over time. In an essay found in a 1967 edition of the Journal *American Scientist*, a segment of a book titled "Beyond the Observatory" by Harlow Shapley was reprinted talking about our breath.^[1] In an essay titled "Breathing the Future and the Past" Shapley counts the atoms in a single deep breath and draws from his meditation a moral for humanity, who he calls, "ingenious but short-sighted."

I'll spare you all of the scientific mumbo-jumbo, but he points out that each breath we take reflects the make up of our atmosphere - 76% nitrogen, 23% oxygen, and 1% argon. And while nitrogen and oxygen are broken down by the sun from molecular form into atomic form and can escape earth's gravity, argon does not. The argon hovers at or near the surface of the earth, and is constantly rebreathed.

And Shapley writes, "Since about 1 per cent of our breath is argon we can determine approximately the number of atoms in your next... breath. In your next determined effort to get oxygen into your lungs...you are taking in, besides the nitrogen and oxygen, 30 quintillion atoms of argon." That is 30 with 18 zeroes after it. A few seconds later you exhale those argon atoms along with quintillions of molecules of carbon dioxide.

He goes on to describe how the plants take in our carbon dioxide in the whole "biological barter system" as he calls it, that takes place between plants and animals.

"If the plants were completely removed from the surface of the earth," he writes, "the atmospheric oxygen would soon disappear because it would all be absorbed into the soil and rocks. With the oxygen decreasing, all the animals would gradually smother. On the other hand, if animal life were entirely removed from the earth, the plants would have to depend on the skimpy amount of carbon dioxide from volcanoes and of organic decay.

Animals and plants need each other vitally."

And please forgive my continuing to quote Shapley here, but his description is so much better than my paraphrase of it would be.

"Now, and this is where it really gets interesting, let's follow the career of one argon-rich breath: your next exhalation, let us suppose. Let's call it Breath X. Take a deep breath, and then exhale. There, that will be your breath X. It quickly spreads. Its argon, exhaled this morning, by nightfall is all over the neighborhood. In a week it is distributed all over the country; in a month, it is in all places where the winds blow. By the end of the year, the 30 quintillion argon atoms of Breath X will be smoothly distributed throughout all the free air of the earth. You will then be breathing some of those same atoms again. A day's breathing a year from now, wherever you are on the earth's surface, will include at least 15 of the argon atoms of today's Breath X.

"This re-breathing of the argon atoms of past breaths, *your own and others'*, has some picturesque implications. The argon atoms... *connect* us, by an airy bond, with the past and the future. For instance, if you are more than twenty years old you have inhaled more than 100 million breaths, each with its appalling number of argon atoms. You contribute so many argon atoms to the atmospheric bank on which we all draw, that the first little gasp of every baby born on earth a year ago contained argon atoms that you have since breathed. And it is a grim fact that you have also contributed a bit to the last gasp of the dying."

And here is where this analogy ties directly to our message today: "Every saint and every sinner of earlier days, and every common human and common beast, have put argon atoms into the general atmospheric treasury. Your next breath will contain more than 400,000 of the argon atoms that Gandhi breathed in his long life. Argon atoms are here from the conversations at the Last Supper, from the arguments of diplomats at Yalta, and from the recitations of the classic poets like Shakespeare and Shelley. We have argon from the sighs

and pledges of ancient lovers, from the battle cries at Waterloo and Gettysburg,” and I would add, from Jesus’ last breath on the cross as well as from ~~this~~ breath in our scripture reading for today, in which he gave his peace and his spirit to his disciples, his followers, then and now.

And he concludes, “Our next breaths, yours and mine, will sample the snorts, sighs, bellows, shrieks, cheers, and spoken prayers of the prehistoric and historic past. And they will include molecules from the breaths of each other as well as from the breath of the Son of God.

“There *ought* to be a moral to this story of argon. It tells us of the dramatic smallness of the units of matter. It reminds us of the turbulence in that gaseous envelope which we call our atmosphere. It associates us intimately with the past and the future.” And it reminds us, I would suggest, that we are all, everyone of us in every corner of the earth, black and white, male and female, old and young, rich and poor, gay and straight, we are ~~all~~ connected to one another, and to our God who created us all in God’s own image, breathed into us the gift of life, and gave to us his peace. And that should give us glad hearts. As the hymn says, “Breathe on me, breath of God.”

Understanding these things about every breath we take, hear again these words from earlier in Acts chapter 2, speaking about Jesus:

God raised him up! God freed him from death’s dreadful grip, since it was impossible for death to hang on to him...

...Therefore, my heart was glad

and my tongue rejoiced.

Moreover, my body will live in hope,

because you won’t abandon me to the grave,

nor permit your holy one to experience decay.

You have shown me the paths of life;

your presence (or maybe your spirit, your breath) will fill me with happiness. (Acts 2: 24-28)

Two things Jesus wanted the disciples to have in their moment of fear was peace and God's Spirit. "Taking a breather" is one way to think about what Jesus offered to them. He wanted them to take his breath so that they would feel his spirit living in them.

Right now, the world is giving us a breather. Rather than live in fear or worry about things that are beyond our control, what if we experienced Christ's peace that he breathed out for us in each breath we take in? What if, being mindful of our breathing, we made our breathing a part of our prayers? Both Fr. Richard Rohr and Pastor Rob Bell, in their writings, include the idea, taken from the ancient Jewish teachings called the *Didache*, that the name of God as it is given in Scripture, Yahweh, was not to be spoken aloud. In fact, they write, the sound of the name being spoken was intended to sound like the sound of our breathing, in and out.

The Hebrew letters that make up the spelling of the name are Yod, Heh, Vah, Heh. Say that with me: Yod - Heh - Vah - Heh. And taking this image one step further, both theologians point out that the first thing we must do when we are born then, as infants straight from the womb, is to breathe, to speak the name of God: Yod - Heh - Vah - Heh. And that the last thing we do when we die, with our last breath, is to speak the name of God. Yod - Heh - Vah - Heh. It is when we can no longer speak God's name that we die.

This week, John Hinton shared with me and several others, a poem written in 1869 by Kathleen O'Meara that, while written following the great famine, I think speaks to us as clearly as it did to her original readers. Hear her words:

And the people stayed home,
and read books,
and listened,
and exercised,
and made art,
and played games,
and learned new ways of being,
and were still, and listened more deeply.

Some meditated,
some prayed,
some danced,
some met their shadows,
and the people began to think differently.

And the people healed.

And, in the absence of people living in ignorant,
dangerous, mindless, and heartless ways,
the earth began to heal.

And when the danger passed,
and people joined together again,
they grieved their losses,
and made new choices,
and dreamed new images,
and created new ways to live and heal the earth fully,
as they had been healed.

In your time of retreat, of quarantine, of isolation, may you and our
world be healed by the breath of Christ.

And may Christ's Peace be with you. Amen.

[📖](#) Harlow Shapley, in *Beyond the Observatory* (222 pages; \$5.50; Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966)