

All I Need Is the Air That You Breathe

Genesis 2:4-7; John 20:19-23

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We are, after several months, coming to the end of our worship focus on the gospel of John (and perhaps some of you are muttering, “finally”). It is, regardless of what you hypothetical mutterers might think, a fascinating book in our Bible, certainly the most mystical and unique of the gospels and in some ways the most complicated. Our worship services this summer have given us the chance to explore several themes of this gospel.

Based on our summer together in worship, I would summarize the gospel of John in three ways:

- 1) It is a gospel that relies on down-to-earth images to convey intricate ideas. In the verses we have examined this summer, Jesus has shared a lot about himself...but he almost always does so through metaphors about things like wine, birth, bread, vision, shepherds, and light. The author of John knows how to take one image and stuff it full with meaning, making it both simple and complex at the same time.
- 2) As a result, John is a gospel that requires a great deal of patience. This is true in the way we interpret the gospel and for the characters within the gospel. We studied the story where Jesus waits before visiting the tomb of Lazarus, and the waiting moves him to tears (or, perhaps, he senses that he is about to be moved to tears and therefore must wait). In John, Jesus is repeatedly asking his disciples to anticipate, to look ahead, to know that things are one way in the present but that “in a little while” they will be another way. Sometimes, the waiting is exasperating; sometimes, the waiting is hopeful; sometimes, the waiting is both of these things...but it is always a wait that requires patience.
- 3) Finally, John is a gospel that delights in dichotomies. We have watched Jesus walk the line between grace and justice, read stories that swing from those in power to those completely lacking power, and have—at Jesus’ exhortation—contemplated life in the shadow of death. There is a sense of completion in John that comes when these dichotomies are invoked and examined together.

Our worship in the round last week emphasized all three of these traits as we stepped into the light. Perhaps more than any other dichotomy, John is interested in darkness and light. He ponders the way that light represents the layered life-giving goodness of Jesus, posits how we grow when we move into the light, and cherishes the hope that comes from Jesus that we understand in the light. In many ways, last week would have made for an ideal conclusion to our Johannine summer.

Instead, we’ve got one more simple image to consider, one more metaphor expressing the mysterious nature of Jesus in earthly, natural, human terms, one more appeal for patience. And, remarkably, it’s an image that we have all grown incredibly familiar with over the past two years, the image of breath.

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In June of 2021, I officiated my 26th wedding. It was supposed to be my 25th wedding, but—as you have probably guessed—the couple had to postpone the ceremony because of Covid. They also had to move the location multiple times, pare down the guest list and the anticipated festivities significantly, and basically re-envision what “wedding” meant.

During their ceremony, I pointed out that they had been forced to give up control of pretty much everything surrounding their wedding...and that we all, really, had been forced to admit that we were not in control as much as we wanted to be: “We have not had control over who we can see and touch, where we can go, how we will learn, or even the air that we breathe. Think about that: we can’t even control our own breath.” Along with so many other things, how we perceived respiratory function had changed.

It used to be, pre-virus, that we thought of breath as a universal constant. It was something you could take for granted—you were, even, encouraged to take it for granted. If you had to spend time concentrating on breathing, that suggested that your brainpower was likely on the limited side. After the virus hit us, we quit taking our breaths for granted.

We also quit assuming that our breaths were universal, and we quit using them to unite us. We isolated, wore masks, put up plastic barriers. We partitioned and separated the air around us. We had no choice, but one byproduct was that our breath quit bringing us together.

You might be familiar with the mindfulness practice of “partnered breathing,” basically a series of exercises where two people attempt to synchronize their inhaling and exhaling in order to connect with each other and build a stronger emotional state.¹ This is a medically-backed practice that requires people to breathe together—close together, touching each other, keenly aware of the flow of air, often sharing that air. It is not a practice that would have worked during the days when Covid raged unchecked through our communities. Those were days when we understood breath as a divisive weapon instead of a uniting balm, when focusing on breathing meant isolating instead of coming together.

As a result, we came to fear breath. I remember a time, in the very first days of the virus, when a line of people waited to check out of the grocery store. The cashier sneezed, once, and the entire line slid over to someone else. He just stood at his register looking embarrassed and glum. To the shoppers, his breath was poison.

This is how we came to understand breath over the past few years: out of control, requiring great attention, separating, dangerous, alarming. It is virtually the opposite of how our Bible understands breath.

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The group that gathered here on Ash Wednesday back in March heard us read the passage from Genesis that we repeat today—I apologize for returning to this scripture again so soon, but it’s nearly impossible to contemplate the image of godly breath without considering the creation story where God breathes life into Adam. Likewise, this passage from Genesis deeply parallels the passage from John that we read today.

¹ Morgan Mandriota, “Mindfulness in Relationships: Breathing Together,” PsychCentral. Medically reviewed by Cheryl Crumple, PhD. March 10, 2022. Accessed August 18, 2022. <https://psychcentral.com/lib/mindfulness-in-relationships-breathing-together>

Both passages feature God—one God the Father, one God the Son, both God—literally exhaling into humanity. Genesis especially emphasizes the act of the air going into the lungs of the one formed from dirt—the verse reads that God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life,” almost suggesting a deity-sourced CPR for the man made of dust. In John, most translations opt for Jesus breathing *on* the disciples...but the Greek word here is one that appears nowhere else in the New Testament, and its meaning is a little unclear. At least one prominent translation reads that Jesus “breathed *into* them,” evoking the same image as Genesis.² There is life given because godly breath is shared with humanity.

Both translations also emphasize that this life is not only a physical life but also a spiritual life. In Genesis, this is achieved through the very word we translate as “breath,” the Hebrew word *ruah* that we also translate as “spirit,” “wind,” and “essence” in other parts of the Old Testament. The very idea of breath and spirit are connected, something John’s readers would have been exceedingly familiar with. But in case the connection is somehow lost, Jesus himself accentuates it by saying “Receive the Holy Spirit” as he breathes on (or into) the disciples.

Just like the passages we read last week, these are stories about light emerging from the darkness; just like the Lazarus story from two weeks ago, these are stories about life emerging from a place where there is none expected. They are stories about breath itself indicating the physical and spiritual life that Jesus begets to humanity.

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There is a significant difference in the two stories: in Genesis, God breathes life into one man; in John, Jesus breathes life into a group of his followers. The man in Genesis, Adam, is meant to represent all of humanity, but there is a distinct emphasis here on the one-on-one relationship between God and Adam. The story in Genesis teaches us that God gives life to every single one of us, as individuals. It highlights the relationship between a far-reaching, magnificent, hard-to-comprehend Creator God and an earthly, minute, human being. It personalizes the relationship. It zeroes in on one God and one human.

The story in John, while equally personal, is more concerned with people connecting with each other. When Jesus reappears to his disciples, who are gathered behind locked doors, he addresses them as a whole. Part of why many translations opt for “Jesus breathed *on* them” instead of “Jesus breathed *into* them” is that the word “on” suggests a breath that settles upon the disciples and draws them together, a uniting holy cloud of vapor, instead of separate breaths that form separate connectors from Jesus to each individual in the room.

The breath of Jesus—the Holy Spirit received by the disciples in this room—may offer life to each of them individually, but that is not the point of this story. The point of this story is that they will experience a new life as a group. Through the Spirit, they will be made whole in each other.

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When our children were born, the first thing I checked was whether or not they were breathing. One of them emerged screaming at a remarkably high decibel level. I immediately assumed (correctly) that she would be full of life, literally and figuratively, that she would be strong and passionate and vivacious. Another of our daughters didn’t make any noise at all; her eyes were wide open and she immediately contemplated and took in the world, but because she made no

² Eugene Peterson, John 20:22, *The Message*.

noise I was (incorrectly) terrified that something was wrong. It turns out she, too, was breathing; it turns out she, too, is full of life...but in a completely different way. The difference in their first breaths told us something about the difference in their spirits.

Breath suggests to us life, not just the life of an active brainwave but the character, the essence, the *ruah* of life.

Moreover, when our children were born, I felt alive in new ways. I think every parent does. I could tell that my own essence had changed. Breathing the same air as my new children made me into a different person, made me a more complete person.

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Same hospital, another year, another patient. One Saturday last April, I sat next to a friend who was dying. His breathing was slow but steady, maybe one breath every few seconds. He seemed comfortable. He definitely still seemed there. Nurses and doctors are understandably loath to tell you how long someone has in a situation like this, but I got the impression he might not have long. He was not awake or expected to wake again. I talked to him for a while, and eventually I said I was just going to sit there. I pulled out my laptop and looked over things for Sunday. Eventually, satisfied with the worship order, I closed the laptop and just held his hand and watched TV.

We—I—watched some college basketball game between two teams that I didn't particularly care about and don't remember now. Suddenly, his breathing changed to a rapid pace, not uncomfortable but not the slow and steady pace he'd had before. Then he stopped. And as I tried to figure out what had just happened, checking to see if his breath had returned, the nurse came in and told me he was gone.

Again, I was changed. Again, even as I felt an absence, I was made more complete. Breath suggests to us not only individual life but relational life, the life of family.

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John includes some of the greatest one-on-one moments in all of our gospels (usually Jesus and another person): Nicodemus approaching Jesus in the still of the night, Jesus approaching the woman at the well in the midday heat, Jesus counseling the man born blind and consoling the woman caught in adultery, Jesus and Martha mourning at Lazarus's grave, Jesus walking on the beach with the beloved disciple. If we're not careful, we can end up thinking that this is a gospel that primarily cares about us as individuals connecting with God...and while it does care about us as individuals connecting with God, it also emphasizes the idea that we're supposed to make this connection as a group, as family. It's that comprehensive dichotomy again.

During Covid, we learned to breathe apart—to prioritize breathing apart. We sought God primarily, maybe only, in our own homes. We had no choice...but we were missing something.

We were missing the chance to be transformed—to be made whole—by sharing our *ruah* with someone else.

When I was in college, some people announced that they were done with church but not with God—they claimed they were seeking their own path to God, and they didn't need the community of church to make that trek. During Covid, this also became popular, not just among college students but among everyone. We live in a culture that champions the individual...but our Bible suggests that we should be traveling our path of faith, breathing the breath of life, not exclusively as individuals but rather as a community. We should be willing to be changed by those who walk with us and breathe the air that we breathe.

It is unnerving to do this. The church has made a *lot* of mistakes over the years. Relationships require risk and vulnerability—the willingness to be changed, the danger of being harmed. But there is also comfort and strength in coming together, breathing together. The disciples gather behind locked doors to seek out that strength, to calm their nerves by coming together.

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The breath of life, in Genesis and in John, is not just something that inflates lungs. It is something that quite literally inspires. The breath of life fills us not only with air but also with joy, patience, peace, and hope. It excites and encourages us. It teaches us love.

Especially in the passage from John, we are taught that this breath of life functions best when it is shared. We are the body, the corpus, of Christ; we breathe corporately. We come together to be inspired. If we try to experience this inspiration separate, apart, then we will not experience it fully.

This is the gospel of John. The story of the complex fullness of Christ revealed to a community of believers in simple images when that community comes together, waits patiently, discovers its essence in the Holy Spirit, and breathes.