

“Breath”
Genesis 2:4-9; Ezekiel 37:1-14;
John 20:19-23

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April 28, 2019
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

I have a confession of a fear of mine this morning. I am a little bit claustrophobic. Is anyone in this room claustrophobic, or am I the only one? I see we do have some claustrophobic people in here. Let’s meet sometime and talk about it in a really big room.

I think what really gets me about claustrophobia is not necessarily being in a tight space, although I don’t enjoy a tight space, or tight clothing, or tight anything. What really gets me is the feeling or the sense of being somewhere and not being able to get out. Being stuck has a profoundly terrifying impact on me. I blame my brother Sean. He tested out his wrestling moves on me when I was a little kid and I couldn’t get loose, so I think it’s his fault entirely.

But this comes up in the weirdest places. When I go to a hotel room and I get into that bed where the sheets have been tucked in really tight, like they’ve been glued onto the sides of the bed, I get in there and think, “This is fine. I’m going to be fine.” Then ten seconds later I’m kicking the sheets as hard as I can to get one foot out and declare freedom.

Or, when I’m on a plane. Everything’s fine when I’m on a plane—no problems at all—until that little thought worms its way into my head: *You can’t get out even if you want to.* Then it’s all I can think about for the rest of the flight. In that moment, sweat starts to form on my brow, the hair on the back of my neck starts to stick up, and I go from these great, deep, cleansing breaths to breathing very shallowly and rapidly. Hopefully that happens in the last hour of the flight and not in the first hour of a seven hour cross country flight.

Most recently where this problem has been coming up for me is at home. We have this big, beautiful brown recliner in our living room. It is technically a chair-and-a-half. What I love about a chair-and-a-half is when you are with your beloved, a chair-and-a-half is the perfect size. It is a great cuddle chair, where we can watch some British television and have a great time. But about half the time when we’re in that chair, one of our children decides to jump into it. Then once one child is in the chair with the both of us, the other child has to be in that chair as well. Then the little dog notices there are four people in a chair built for 1 ½ and she cannot be left out, so she jumps into the chair. And then the slightly larger dog says, “Wait, there are two people, two children, and a small dog in that chair. I must be there as well.” Suddenly six of us are in a chair built for 1.5. If I notice the panic setting in, I can find a reason to leave the chair. Oh, there’s something I need in the kitchen. Oh, my phone’s ringing. I need to get up. I need to move. But if I don’t notice the panic setting in and all of a sudden my breath starts to get faster, I start flinging humans or animals or whatever is in my way to get out of that chair as quickly as possible.

What I love about this Gospel passage this morning is that I think we have encountered the disciples in a claustrophobic moment. They have put all of their faith and all of their hope in Jesus. They have bet their lives, their vocations, their relationships—they bet everything on Jesus and he did something unthinkable. He died. He died.

While last week we saw that Jesus appeared to Mary and had shown her his resurrection, either the disciples have not heard this from Mary yet and the last thing they saw was John and Peter running to an empty tomb and walking away confused, or they have heard from Mary and being that this was the first century and women's testimony wasn't admissible in court, they may have simply not believed her. So they locked themselves away in a room in their fear. I think this is a moment where their breath is shallow and rapid, and not the deep, cleansing breaths that the body requires.

In the midst of this, Jesus does something pretty incredible. He shows up through a locked door. Now this is one of those understated John moments that drives me crazy. I want to know how Jesus appeared, exactly. Did Jesus knock? Did Jesus turn into a ghost and just phase through the door? Is that a post-resurrection thing? Did Jesus just transport through the door like Nightcrawler from the X-Men? How did Jesus get into the room? John has zero interest in telling us. Just that in post-resurrection, locked doors are apparently irrelevant to the Lord Jesus Christ.

So he appears before them and says to them, "Peace." This is really important because they are terrified, and someone they thought was dead just appeared in front of them. I would need to hear "Peace" as well. But then Jesus does an interesting thing to give them peace. He basically says, "Examine me. Check me out. Look for the holes. They're there. Feel the flesh. Interact with the beard. Feel my body. Know that I am real."

I know in this church we have some analytical people among us. We have some scientists among us; people that need to see things for themselves. They need to touch things for themselves. They need to interact and study things for themselves. I love that Jesus, in his resurrection, doesn't say, "Just believe!" He says, "Just believe, and by the way, confirm. Touch, feel, interact with me. Know that I am real." What a gift! What a gift Jesus gives his friends in that moment.

He says "Peace" again. Then he says this interesting thing. He says, "Just as the Father sent me, I'm going to send you." Then he breathes the Holy Spirit onto them.

I gave you these passages from Genesis and Ezekiel because I wanted us to see just a small picture of the narrative arc of breath in the Bible. We start with Genesis, the creation narrative. God is creating. He's making things. I always loved the imagery from C. S. Lewis' *The Magician's Nephew* of a ground that is so fertile that if a lamp post hits it, it turns into a living lamp post in Narnia. It's ground where anything will grow. And God takes that dirt and he forms a human, and that human exists as a pile of

mud until God breathes into its nostrils. Literally, the only difference between Adam, which is just Hebrew for humankind—the only difference between Adam and dirt is the breath of God. I love that image. The breath of God, the animating power of God, is the only difference between dirt and humankind. I like that. That feels good to me. That feels right to me.

Then we jump forward to Ezekiel. Ezekiel has this weird vision where he has to prophecy to dead bones and they have to grow flesh and be a zombie army for a minute. It's this weird place in scripture until Ezekiel is asked, "Prophecy to the wind that my breath may enter them." What's great here is that word— *ruakh* in Hebrew. Literally the scripture says to prophecy to the *ruakh* that they may have my *ruakh* in them. There's no distinction between the wind and the breath. It is the animating power of God. These people stand. They're a multitude. They are powerful. But they are nothing. They are not actually alive until they have breath, until the wind comes and breathes into their lungs.

So here is Jesus standing in front of his scared and terrified friends, and what does he give them? What does he give his shallow-breathing, scared friends? He gives them the gift of the deep breath of the Spirit of God. The Spirit is always associated with wind and breath in the Old Testament. He gives them that breath inside their lungs.

I love this interesting thing he says beforehand: "As the Father sent me, I send you." Well, how did the Father send Jesus? If you remember, Jesus was baptized and as he comes out of the water the Father speaks a blessing over him: "This is my beloved son. With him I am well-pleased." Then the Spirit falls like a dove on top of Jesus. Jesus' ministry was sent by the Father with the power of the Spirit. How does Jesus send his people into the world for the ministry of forgiving sins and proclaiming forgiveness to the entire world? He doesn't send them with theology. He doesn't send them with, "Now that you've seen me resurrected, you will no longer act like doubting, power-hungry people like you did for the last 20 chapters of this book." He sends them with the transforming Spirit. "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you," and he breathes the Holy Spirit into their nostrils, into their lungs, into their bodies, into every square inch of their being. It is in that way that they are sent into the world.

So I was trying to think about my own experiences with the Holy Spirit, my own experiences with the breath of God. There's one story that comes to mind. I'm going to try really hard to not only convey details, but feeling. I think it's hard to express feeling. It's hard to explain feeling. Details are sometimes what we fall back on. The problem is that in the Bible, whenever the Spirit is mentioned, we always get words like "It was *like* the wind" or "It was *like* fire." There are ways in which it's just unarticulatable. But I will do my best to articulate the unarticulatable. (I'm not even sure that's a word.)

When I was on staff with InterVarsity at the University of Idaho, we were a pretty normal InterVarsity chapter. We gained a couple of people every year; graduated a couple of people every year; lots of Bible study; lots of discipleship, friendship, and

Frisbee. But about three or four years into my time there, God was moving us into a season of more prayer. We were just praying more. We would pray instead of having small groups sometimes. We would pray instead of having worship services sometimes. We just fell in love with prayer. It was an interesting time in our chapter.

In the midst of that time, we went to a conference and the speaker that year was part of the 24/7 Prayer movement, which some of you may have heard me mention in the past. The shorthand of it is that it's a movement of people that facilitate an unbroken prayer in hour-long shifts around the world at all times. It started January 1, 2000, and it's been going ever since. There's one group somewhere praying for one hour every day of the week and filling up the whole calendar.

As he was speaking, there was a lot of resonance with what was going on in our chapter. But then, we got to a night where he was reading the vision of 24/7 Prayer over us. It included allusions to Ezekiel and that dry bones passage. When he was reading it, probably for the first time in my life that I can really articulate, there was a communal experience where it seemed like everybody was interacting with God's Spirit. There was a sense of electricity in the room. Hairs were standing up on arms and necks. People were just feeling the thing that we don't know how to articulate, but it's all happening to everyone at the same time. We're looking at each other. "Are you feeling this?" "Uh-huh." Things were just happening in that space.

Afterwards I and the other staff got our chapters and our students together. Everyone had a dazed look on their face like, "Well, God just happened. What do I do now?" We had taken on the challenge that after this conference we were going to do a week of unbroken prayer in my basement. I don't remember who said it, but as we were talking, someone said, "What if it were a month instead of just a week?" We all just felt this deep sense of "Yeah! A month! That's a great idea."

And then we got home. We are a chapter of 30 people. That means six people get a day off at any moment. It's March, which means y'all are supposed to go home for spring break. We looked at the students and shared the realities, and they looked back at us and said, "We just won't go home. We're going to pray instead." My basement became full of prayer, 24 hours a day. It was amazing. It was beautiful. I could tell you great stories of people going down there, feeling the thing, coming upstairs, confessing the sin, I say they're forgiven. They actually feel forgiven and live differently instead of just hearing it. That's the difference between theology and power. That was happening.

But what I want to articulate is the feeling of that time. As I have reflected upon it, and prayed about it, and tried to remember those times, and read journals from that time, the thing that feels most noteworthy is that I felt light for the whole month. Not light, like a light bulb. Light like my shoulders felt unburdened. Nothing felt heavy. It's weird that I was praying 3:00-5:00 every morning every day. When I had kids I was up 3:00-5:00 in the morning every day and I was tired all the time. But that wasn't present

then. There was a lightness of being. There was a distinct lack of the anxieties and the stress that always defines my life. There was a lightness.

As I'm looking back at what scripture says about the Spirit of God, I wonder if that was just the feeling of what happened when, instead of breathing my own shallow breaths, I was breathing deeply the creative, energizing power of God all of the time. It makes me wonder how our lives look different when we're not breathing our own breath, when we're not breathing just the breath that is in our own lungs, we're not breathing the best we can do and the most we can manage, but we're breathing God's Spirit and experiencing God's Spirit.

Could it be that part of the ramifications of resurrection that Jesus promises us is not just the forgiveness of sins, not just a future heaven, but it is a promise of access to the energy and the power and the goodness of God that can be breathed at any time? What if that is the promise of Jesus' resurrection?

If you know me, I have a conviction that you should never just look at scripture; you should do something with it. Application! I love application. I confess that if this was a college ministry, the world I know, right now you would all be broken up into groups of three and you would all be praying for each other and asking for the breath of God to fill all of your lungs. I'm not going to do that to you this morning.

But I am going to do two things this morning. One, I am going to end this time by praying for all of us. I would ask that if you are feeling like you want a little bit more breath of God in your lungs, my invitation when I'm praying for you is to just put your hands out to receive something and to be really aware of your own breath while I'm praying. Take deeper breaths. I don't know what's going to happen. You can't control God's Spirit. It's God. I'm not God. But maybe something will happen.

The other thing I would invite you to do is to pray with somebody this week. It doesn't have to be long—just five minutes. Just lay your hands on a friend and have a friend lay a hand on your shoulder and pray for you and ask for more of God's breath to be in your lungs, for more of God's Spirit to fill your body. I would say that to increase the likelihood of that happening, if it is someone in this room you want to pray with, make a date before you leave or just do it in the pews when we're done. It increases the likelihood. Every step you take away from here, the less likely you're going to do it, right? So make a date to do it.

My goal for this is not for us to be more "Spirit" people. It's that maybe we will all experience the lightness God wants for us. Maybe we will all experience the full life that God wants for us. Maybe we will all experience more of God's Spirit in our lives. Maybe we will experience what it looks like to go from a clod of dirt to the full human that God intended us to be.

I'm going to pray for us.

Jesus, thank you so much that you ignore locked doors, that when we lock ourselves away from you or out of fear we lock ourselves away from each other or away from this world, you have zero respect for our locked doors. You just appear right inside them. Thank you. Thank you that you love us too much to let us lock you out. I ask this morning, Jesus, that you would please breathe on us as you breathed on your disciples 2,000 years ago. May we open ourselves and our lungs and our bodies to breathe deeply the same Holy Spirit that brought life to Adam, the same Holy Spirit that brought life to the vast army that Ezekiel saw in his vision, the same Holy Spirit that brought life to a fearful group of disciples 2,000 years ago. May we know the commission you have given us to speak forgiveness to ourselves and to the entire world. On the cross your work was finished. May we experience that finished nature of forgiveness in our lives. Spirit, fill us that we may do your work. Fill us that we may know your peace and your lightness. Fill us so that we may experience the resurrection in our lives today. Amen.