

THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF BURLINGTON
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

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“Just Breathe”

Preached by the Rev. Elissa C. Johnk

A reading by Yehuda Amichai, titled: People in the Dark Always See

People in the dark always see people
In the light. It’s an old truth, since sun and night
Were created, people and darkness, and electricity.
A truth exploited by those who make war
For easy killing in an ambush, a truth that enables
The unhappy to see the happy, and the lonely – people in love
In a brightly lit room.

Yet true life is led between dark and light:
“I locked the door,” you said,
An important sentence, full of destiny.
I still remember the words,
But I forgot on which side of the door they were said,
Inside or outside.

And from the only letter I wrote to you
I remember only the bitter taste of

The stamp’s glue on my tongue.

Here ends the reading.

Will you pray with me?

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, o God, our rock, our breath of life, and our redeemer. Amen.

Everything I needed to know I learned in kindergarten. Have you all seen those posters? Well, I think there is some validity to that. A lot of the simple rules of life – we learn as kids. For me, it was often playing some sport or another.

Play fair, don’t let bad calls get under your skin. There is nothing quite like a good muddy field to slide on. As long as you’re not old enough to do your own laundry. Etc.

I remember one lesson that has stuck with me. I was about 7, and for some crazy reason I was playing goalie for my soccer team. I say crazy because, to this day, I still have a terrible fear of balls aimed at my head. Another life lesson – know which sports you should play.

Anyway, I was back there, and of course, there was a breakaway, coming right at me. He went left and I got there just in time, and the ball made contact with my diaphragm and I swear from the pulpit the world stopped. I had gotten the wind knocked out of me.

I had never felt anything like it, the colors around me went dark, a movie fade-out green to brown to black. I went to breathe and I couldn't. There was no air to be had. Air didn't exist. Nothing seemed to exist but this movement – in and out and in and out, this basic thing we learn before anything else, wasn't working. And without it, nothing else matters.

Genesis states that ¹ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ¹ When no shrub of the field had yet appeared on the earth and no plant of the field had yet sprung up ... the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

Our early stories of creation revolve around this movement in and out. Because without it, without God's breath we are just Adam – in Hebrew adam – related to *adamah*, meaning earth. Dust.

Our early stories of creation revolve around breath because we know what it feels like when we lose it. I remember that moment when I was 7 because it happens a lot in life, doesn't it?

When the doctor comes into the room with the test results and you can't quite read her face, but she isn't smiling, and the virus has taken the breath from your lungs. When you have the same fight over and over again with your partner and they turn to you and say I can't do this anymore. When you look out the windows at the empty streets, and contemplate the scale of loss going on behind all the other closed doors.

When you look at your kids, and worry about what they're missing in this time.

When the person you love – the one who changed your life, the one who lovingly tended the wounds of the sick, is himself wounded, nailed to a tree until he breathed his last with a whisper, it is finished.

In and out and in and out, and there just isn't any air.

Can't you hear the disciples talking amongst themselves? What can he possibly mean, it is finished? It is not finished! Did you hear – some are saying that the body is gone – some are saying that he isn't dead. It isn't possible. If it is possible, that somehow he is alive, what does that mean for those who had run away from him on the cross? Can't you just picture their confusion? Oh, the world must have just seemed to have stopped.

What do you do in these moments? You huddle together. You lock yourself inside and wait for the world to start spinning again.

You wait for the darkness to fade.

You wait, simply, until you can catch your breath.

Until God walks through all the walls you have built up, walks through all the locked doors, and whispers to you, peace. Peace to you.

You wait until God breaks into that moment, breaks through death, and comes so close to you that you can feel the breath on your cheek and whispers to you Peace. Receive the holy spirit.

Receive the holy spirit in the small moments, when someone comes rushing onto the soccer field and puts her hands on your shoulders and whisper “oh baby, shhh, peace.”

Receive the holy spirit in the big moments when the loved ones come into the waiting room at the doctors office, to hold your hand and whisper shhh, peace.

Receive the holy spirit when your best friend comes with a pint of ice cream, two spoons, and a shoulder to cry on.

Receive the holy spirit when your phone rings, and it’s a friend calling to see how you are holding up, and you don’t know what to say, and so you start to cry, and the sound of their support is whispering, peace, peace, peace.

Receive the holy spirit when God walks fresh into your life and says that awful moment was not the end, this is not the end. No matter what it feels like, look, I have not abandoned you. I am right before you, my hands are outstretched before you.

I am breathing new life into those dusty, battered bones just as surely as I did at creation. Your creation.

We equate breath with creation not **just** because we know what it is like when we lose it, but also because we know the **glory** of what it is to get it back. That first lungful. The first lungful after a long run. The first intake when you realize that you are in love. Still in love. The first deep belly laugh after loss. The first gasp the disciples must have taken when he walked into that room.

This is a creation story.

The creation of a new people. A resurrected people.

Not just one person, but all of us.

Last Sunday, we proclaimed the good news of Easter – he is risen! Alleluia!

But I know that most of us are still a with those disciples – the ones who had heard the news but couldn’t believe it was true. The ones who were locked away, behind the four walls of their home, afraid, maybe even holding our breath, and waiting for this to be all over. Trapped in our understanding of the world as it was..

If this morning’s scripture tells us anything, it is that if that’s where we are – if none of this make sense to you, that’s okay.

That’s actually where you are supposed to be. Not making meaning yet. Not jumping ahead to what’s next. But right here, in your four walls, whatever they look like, struggling to catch your breath.

Because the earliest disciples didn’t know what this meant either –they were also waiting to see for themselves how God was going to break into the world.

And God’s answer to them was through them. “as the Father has sent me, so do I send you.”

So wherever you are *in this journey* from cradle to cross to open tomb, whether the world is spinning for you right now or stopped in its tracks, just remember that everything you needed to know you learned in kindergarten: just breathe.

Breathe in, because the Spirit of God is so clearly with you.

You are not alone. Never alone.

And while we are not meant to make meaning of this – not while in the thick of it – we do know that God will use this time, if we let her. God will use this time, if we take this pause, and breathe in the Spirit.

As one colleague of mine, the Rev. Nicole Lamarche, said last Sunday, “we have officially arrived at the edge of our knowing. And as much as this can make us cry or make us anxious, or threaten to reduce us, it also means we ... have arrived at a place [that] is offering us opportunities that may never come again...Over the last weeks, I have heard of ideas placed on the table that were labeled too expensive or too radical not long ago- housing those who are unhoused [...], paid sick leave, subsidies for lower carbon travel, a living wage for all essential workers...

Quoting a Nobel-award winning economist, she notes the economic concept of the “shock doctrine” which states: “Only a crisis-actual or perceived-produces real change. When the crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.”

“Because we can no longer claim to know where we are going, we have a chance to go somewhere else, somewhere new, somewhere that God is calling us,” she finishes.ⁱ

In the images of this morning’s scripture, we are in a place where there are no doors that can hold us except the ones of our imagination.

“*I locked the door!*” the poet writes, forgetting *on which side of the door they were said*.

The hardest walls are not the ones of our homes, but of our heads – spinning our wheels wondering how and why and when. Trapped in a vision of the world as it was.

Brothers and sisters, breathe in.

Breathe in, because God is looking ahead to the world as it **can be.**

And then, friends, once you are good and full of the knowledge that God is with you, let it out.

Because I see that spirit in you so clearly, and the world needs it.

Breathe out, because when you do, you make an incredible number of masks in a matter of days for our friends at The Residence at Shelburne Bay. They asked, you answered.

Let the Spirit out, because when you do, you raise hundreds of dollars for Justice for All in a single offering.

Let the Spirit out, because those of you serving in healthcare facilities, well, you are holding the breath for others when they can no longer do it themselves.

Let the Spirit out, because as you do, you do things like what happened at Trustees and Deacons this week - think about how we can move forward with a summer food garden for the hungry.

Let the Spirit out, because when you do, you decorate the world in love.

Friends, I so clearly see the holy spirit at work in you right now. Moving in the way you take care of one another in this time. Just this past week, I called an elderly congregant who was, even before the quarantine, struggling to stay at home.

And during the fifteen minutes of our call, he told me not only of the daily phone calls he receives from several of you, but also of the Easter dinner that arrived, unexpectedly, and the mailed copies of my sermons he gets each week. (Note, I did not send them.)

Now, I know we are all in need right now, and some of us might not be as plugged in to the caring networks. So if you could use a hand, some groceries, or just a phone call, but haven't received one - please reach out. You can call me, or any member of our Partners in Pastoral Care - Janice Clements, Michael Samara, Tony Hall - using our directory. Because if this scripture tells us anything it is that you are not alone.

God is with you - but so are we.

Each of us today, participating in worship from the confines of our own homes, in some way or another, stand as testimony to the ways in which the holy spirit moves. All of us are being called to our own missions of peace.

Because that's the way Resurrection spreads.

That is the way the resurrection has always spread.

The breathing, of course, is metaphorical. If you are actually breathing out on anyone in this time, you are part of the problem, not the solution.

But the relationship between breath and diffusion of the Spirit isn't accidental. Early Christian scholar Caroline Johnson Hodge once told me that the earliest Christians would have thought of the spirit like a form of breathable gold dust, floating in the air during our baptism - that we take into our bodies, and it transforms us.

So, no matter where you are right now, no matter how you are feeling, whether the door feels wide open, or locked up tight, my prayer for you this morning is that you might be open to receiving the holy spirit. May you be open to the transformation she brings in this time.

And if you ever forget how, we're here to remind you.

[videos of peace]

ⁱ <https://www.facebook.com/nicole.lamarche>