

April 11, 2020 Easter Vigil

We have been hearing a lot about breathing lately—shortness of breath, respiratory illness, respirator shortage.

Now I want you all to close your eyes, go ahead, close them for just a moment. Now take a deep breath. Take it in through your nose and out through your mouth. Feel it deep within. One more, and this time mean it. Okay, you can open your eyes.

Breath. What an amazing gift. Breathing seems so simple sometimes. In fact, most of the time, we do it without even a conscious thought. I mean, how many times throughout the day do you stop and think. Wow, I am breathing. This is amazing! Probably not very often.

Many of us though, have had moments in our lives where we did realize we were breathing and it was a glorious moment. Like the time you ran a 5K and thought you might not make it. Or the day that your breath was heaving and fast and seemed so hard to grasp as you gave birth to your first child. Or the day you watched a loved one take their last breath. Those breaths we remember, but so many go unnoticed. Breathing is so easy, that most of us can do it in our sleep.

Let's take one more for good measure, shall we?

Who taught you how to breathe? Well that's sort of a silly question. No one taught you how to breathe, you just breathe. It's simply innate, a function of our physical body. We know how to breathe simply by breathing.

Breathing is a scientific process by which we take in oxygen, our diaphragm flattens, our abdomen is engaged, the oxygen flows into our blood and through our body, just in time for us to breathe out and let go of carbon dioxide. Scientifically explained, but where did it come from? Where did we get our breath?

Earlier in the service we heard the creation story from the book of Genesis, and in this account from Chapter one, we hear that "the Spirit of God swept over the face of the waters."

Now, in the second creation story, the one found in Genesis, chapter 2, it says, "Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and **breathed** into his nostrils the **breath** of life; and the man became a living being."

Now, all of this time, we have been talking about our breath as a simple systematic, scientific, physical function, but here is where the Bible throws us through a loop.

As you know, the Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew.

The original Hebrew word here for breath, **ruach** (pronounced **Roo-ak**) also means **spirit** and it also means **life** and **wind**.

Where we would often distinguish these words, the Bible uses them interchangeably.

Let's let that sink in for a moment.

Maybe this would be a good time to take another deep breath.

In the Hebrew Scriptures; breath, spirit, life, and wind are the same word. Ruach.

In our reading from Ezekiel, we hear God say that God will give that same breath, that same ruach, to the dry bones and cause them to live.

The dry bones in the valley do not have life in them at first. They are dead, they have no breath and no spirit. But God commands Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones, and in doing this "the breath (the ruach) will come into them and they will live." In this way, the body is a shell, a clay vessel, which God fills with breath, with life, with spirit.

Now, before I leave you in the Old Testament, I want to show you how the words breath and spirit are linked in the same way in the New Testament.

Yesterday, on Good Friday, we are reminded of the story of Christ's passion and death, and in this narrative, we learn about the breath of Jesus. In Luke's account, Jesus says, "Father, into your hands, I commend my **Spirit**." Having said this, he **breathed** his last."

The words **Spirit** and **breathed** in this verse from Luke, chapter 23, both words, spirit and breath, come from the same Greek word, **pneuma**. So, we could translate this verse, "Father, into your hands, I commend my **breath**." Having said this, he gave up his **Spirit**." In this moment, Jesus dies. The concept of breath and spirit and life are all linked in the Greek word pneuma, just as they were in the Hebrew word ruach.

If we stopped there, at the crucifixion, the story would be over. There is no more breath. There is no more life. There is no more spirit.

But the story does not end there. We do not sit in the power of darkness forever, because we are an Easter people.

There in the darkness of the grave, the dead body of Jesus lay lifeless and breathless. And at some point that night Jesus' lungs contracted and his diaphragm expanded and he took a breath. And with that breath, the darkness was shattered and death was defeated.

In the midst of darkness, light breaks forth and we are given a new Spirit, a Holy Spirit, a new life, a new breath, that speaks goodness and love to the world. We turn on our lights and ring our bells and cry out Alleluia!

We use our breath to preach forgiveness and mercy, kindness and compassion, joy and peace. We use our new breath to give new life to the world.

With that breath, we sing Alleluia with the sure and certain hope that Christ is risen.

In this Easter season, we rejoice in the power of the Holy Spirit.

In this Easter season, we go forth to live a life inspired by Christ Jesus who rose from the dead, and who showed us that there is life after death, for there is life after breath. And we use our breath to say with our mouths and our lives, "Christ is Risen! He is Risen, indeed! Alleluia!" Amen.