

Breath of Life

Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133; 1 John 1:1—2:2; John 20:19-31

Last week's Easter sermon through the lens of Peter's sermon in Acts was focused on the kerygma, on the core of the Christian message: Christ is risen! This week gives us a chance to draw out Easter's implications for what Christians have to say about other things, like creation, humanity, and the last things.

Our jumping-off point today is John's depiction of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps to establish the thematic proximity of the gift of the Spirit to Jesus' resurrection, John keeps the scene on that very first Easter Sunday in the evening. The disciples are huddled in fear—despite hearing the news of the resurrection from Mary Magdalene—because they expect further recriminations from the authorities. Their battened-down hatches are unable to withstand Jesus's approach, as the one who trampled down death needs not huff and puff and blow the house down like the big, bad wolf to get inside.

In their midst, in their fear, in their confusion, Jesus comes and says, "Peace be with you," showing them his scar-marred hands and side (vv. 19-20). Quickly, the fear, the confusion, the guardedness dissipates. I wouldn't be surprised if the sun twinkled one last time and the birds sang one last chorus before settling down for the night; regardless, the disciples were "filled with joy" (v. 20). Jesus, seizing the moment, offers an extra helping of peace before reminding them that they're not just disciples (who learn from their teacher) but apostles (meaning the sent ones) whom Jesus sends, much as he was sent by the Father.

But Jesus, having taken stock of these purported followers who scattered when he was arrested and whom he found cowering in a secure location not preaching in the streets and on the rooftops, knows that commissioning them in that state to go into the world—the same world that had

rejected him and that he told them would reject them too (cf. John 15:18-25)—that world would not be setting them up for success. Jesus’s plan is to give them the very best thing he has. He defies all COVID-protocols and breathes on them, exhales into their nostrils and lungs, and says the sweetest sounding words: “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:22). Interestingly, the keys to the kingdom, the binding and loosing powers which some denominations would argue were given solely to Peter (cf. Matthew 16:13-20), seem to be bestowed on the whole company of disciples in John. I want to share a story posted by Laura Fohse, my friend and colleague in ministry at McClure United Church here in Saskatoon about how that breath can still bring new life today.

“So I've sort of had this week off and decided to paint rocks and make a kindness rock garden. [The garden has a sign that says: “Take one, Share one, Make one, Leave one.] I found the painting process very relaxing and inspiring (there's just something about holding rocks) and did my best to let go of perfectionism (more or less successfully).

I decided to do this for a couple of reasons (1) I needed something to occupy myself so I didn't spend the week in front of the tv and (2) people seem to be a little grumpy these days and I thought maybe we could all use a little kindness.

At the beginning of this pandemic a year ago I noticed, for the most part, people were going out of their way to be kind. "We're in this together" was a common slogan. I've had a number of Zoomy conversations recently with my congregation and many of them are talking about how people seem cranky. Pandemic fatigue is a thing. Increased mental health challenges and anxiety is also a thing. So I thought I might as well nurture my own spirit and, at the same time, offer a little kindness back into the world.

Last night (and this is the real reason for the post) someone rang our door bell at around 5pm (although I can't be sure because who can keep track of time these days). Standing on our step was

a youngish man (mid 20s or so) wet from the rain. He said "you don't know me but I wanted to stop and thank you for the rocks in your yard" and he burst into tears. [Her partner] Jordan invited him into the entry (appropriate masking in place) and he went on to say that he was walking by and saw the rocks and it made him smile and touched his heart and brought tears of gratitude. He continued to walk but then thought "no, I have to go tell those people that I'm grateful"... and he did. We introduced ourselves to each other. He told us that he was from Iran and had been in Canada 4 years. He stood in our entryway oozing gratitude and literally sobbing (and apologizing for sobbing). In that moment I felt a shift in my own heaviness. I felt like whatever has been clenching my heart loosened its grip a bit. And I felt so much gratitude for this man and for his courage in knocking on a strangers door and allowing himself to be vulnerable in such a profound way.

A friend of mine (Deborah-Ruth Ferber) asked on FB the other day (in a pre-sermon inquiry) how others have encountered Christ.

This! And this is what I will hold onto over the next weeks as I move out of blechy ugh and into the new life that Easter and spring bring.”

In breathing the Spirit into the disciples, Jesus reenacts the scene from the Garden of Eden, is once more (as always) the creator who takes raw, lifeless potential and makes it into something real which it could never otherwise be. Just as the dry bones in the valley in Ezekiel's vision come to life with “the Breath”. So too with the Spirit, the frightened deserters are made into the church, the company of believers, the friends of God. Jesus, the Word who was with God in the beginning (John 1:1), is re-creating them. The project begun in the resurrected Jesus is not yet complete in them, and yet by the Spirit is already begun in them as well. Paul can cry out, “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24) and a few verses later, also say, “the way we live is based on the Spirit” (8:4).

God's project of a new spiritual humanity— Christ the first-fruits, carried on in the church—is the same project begun in the garden. The lesson from 1 John points us towards its end: “Our fellowship with God and with the Son, Jesus Christ...so that our joy can be complete” and to “live in the light in the same way as he is in the light” (1:3-4, 7). Union with God, each other, and all creation is what humanity is meant for.

Instead of growing into perfection, all creation and humanity followed into the brokenness of sin and its concomitants: disorder, decay, devastation, death. The powers of violence and greed along with race, the uniquely modern powers that try to pass themselves off as perfectly natural. These powers would love nothing more than to be described as the immutable laws inscribed upon the fabric of reality: might makes right, supply and demand, race as biological fact. Whether sin is something we're born with à la Augustine or an all-pervasive perversion of the social and physical fabric we're born into, it remains an inescapable presence.

For 1 John to assure that Jesus “is God's way of dealing with our sins, not only ours but the sins of the whole world” (2:2) is to say that Easter fixes a problem exceeding individual indiscretions. Easter is the beginning of the healing of the universal scope of sin's effects. Christ came to save souls but also bodies and families and nations...and plants and animals and microorganism and minerals. From quarks and leptons all the way to galaxy clusters, Christ came to save all of it and even us, maybe especially us.

The challenge, the paradox, of talking about salvation is holding together without collapsing is the fact that salvation has been completed on Good Friday and Easter and that salvation remains incomplete until that last day when “God is all in all” (1 Cor 15:28).

When Jesus died on the cross and rose again, salvation happened; when death is no more and the former things have passed away (Rev 21:4), salvation will have happened. In the meantime,

when the Holy Spirit gets breathed into human nostrils, salvation happens, and the church is where we know to look for salvation to be happening. In the fellowship of the congregation, in the preaching and the sacraments, in being the church whether it is in person or through technology salvation is happening. That ongoing aspect of salvation, which we call sanctification, may be uneven, but it continues to happen nevertheless. It is not ours to assert our own sinlessness—“If we claim, ‘We don’t have any sin,’ we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8)—but to trust that there is forgiveness for us when we do sin.

To be saved is also to be sent. One of the best ways to “work out your salvation” is while on assignment. In giving us something to do, Jesus also gives us an opportunity to bear fruit. In putting us in situations we wouldn’t go seeking out for ourselves, Jesus lets our giftings shine and uncovers those areas of weakness we’ve constructed our lives to hide. In sending us to church, Jesus forces us into a unity with those whom we might not think we have share much in common. Without being sent, we might think that our salvation is basically about ourselves and miss out on how much bigger than us it is. In truth it embraces all of creation. “Receive the Holy Spirit . . . and go, spread it to all you encounter. Thanks be to God. Amen.