

Bearing the Breath of God

1 Peter 2:4-10, John 20:19-31

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If pictures speak a thousand words,
 then there was a lot of conversation at my ordination a few weeks ago...
 not only from the pictures being taken,
 but because my mom insisted on bringing a photo album for the reception.
It was one she made for me when I turned 30,
 and it was full of my baby pictures, my first day of school, my first day of college, and a host of
 other events from my life.

She thought people would get a kick out of it—
 not only for my bad teenage hairstyles—
 but because they would see themselves, for there were people there from all stages of my life.
And she thought they'd get a kick out of seeing how far I had come
 since the days of baby bottles and Big Wheels.

Even I got caught up in these pictures.
I kept looking at one particular photo.
 I was one-year old, sitting in a high chair, and had spaghetti sauce all over my face.
I stared at the picture, wondering:
 Did I have any idea then of who I would be now?

I imagine the same kind of question would be asked if the church universal had a photo album like this.
There would be all kinds of snapshots...
 some we like more than others...
 monastics in the desert of the 4th century,
 crusaders in their armor during the middle ages,
 priests in Gothic cathedrals of the Renaissance,
 reformers meeting in German basements.

But I imagine we'd be drawn to the baby pictures...
 The way we take to puppy dogs or ducklings...
Wanting to see the infancy of the church...
And we would stare at those faces, wondering
 Did they have any idea then of who we would be now?

That first image in the book might not be what we expect.
No sweet little infants, curled in bassinets,
 But a rag tag group of people gathered in an upper room.

No doubt the picture would be black and white,
 Reflecting the grayscale of the mood,
Somber, taken in a dark stone room.
The photo might show a few men against the wall,
 their heads in their hands,
 a couple women in the dusty corner,
 their heads bent together, whispering to one another.

This snapshot is the birth of the church as John tells it.
The womb is more like a tomb,
 in which the disciples of Jesus are trapped.

It's Easter evening, and there is nowhere for them to go.
Their leader is dead, and the folks that had him killed are probably on the hunt for them.
 They're scared and grief-stricken,
 and so they've sequestered themselves in a stone-walled room in Jerusalem.

To be honest, I don't blame them.
I've had a day or two like this, when the grief, anxiety, and fear seemed overwhelming,
when it felt the bottom had just dropped out of my world
and I had no idea where to go or what to do.

And yet it's here – in the midst of that grief and anxiety – that Jesus comes to find them.
And his first words are "Peace be with you."

The disciples seem to be in disbelief,
until he shows them his hands and his sides – and they see his wounds –
and then they know for sure it is Jesus,
fully alive, fully there, and they rejoice.

"Peace be with you," he says again.

Like a balm, like a salve, Jesus' voice hushes their fears.
 "Peace" to you in your grief over my death,
 "Peace" to you in your fears about the religious authorities,
 "Peace" to you in the midst of the sadness and the worry and the guilt and the anger.

And then Jesus does the most peculiar thing:
 He breathes on them and says "Receive the Holy Spirit."

This is John's version of Pentecost.
 The spirit of God coming to the disciples
 not with tongues of fire as in the book of Acts
 but with the intimacy and gentleness of breath.

Jesus breathed on them.

The breath of God is not new to us.
 God breathed life into the dust and created Adam.
 God breathed life into the dry bones we heard in Ezekiel last week.
 And God breathed life into these disciples – a new creation – the new church of God.

And then with their lungs and their hearts full,
 God sent them out into the world.

The baby pictures of the church would show this cloistered group,
 stepping out of the house for the first time,
 the sun beating down, as their eyes came into focus and they began to take their first few steps.

It's not that the risks were gone or that their enemies had gone missing,
 but God's spirit was with them, and it gave them courage
 to leave that room, that tomb, that womb,

and to become the breath and voice and spirit of God in their community.

And we know how the story goes...

They told their stories about Jesus.
They told of their own forgiveness and God's forgiveness.
They proclaimed hope for the hopeless.
They sought justice for the oppressed.
They prayed and healed
and risked their lives because God was with them,
and they became the church.

With the guidance of the Spirit,
they left the stone walls of that upper room,
because they were, as Peter would later write,
the living stones of God's spiritual house.
They were the breathing, moving, dynamic temple of God.

And as they went into the world and shared their stories, God's church grew.
As they breathed the breath of God, it blew through lands, and times, and centuries,
Through the monastics and the middle ages
Through the Renaissance and the reformers
Through pilgrims, and pioneers, and through the people of First Church.

And so, here we are,
heirs of these early disciples,
and heirs of the air they breathed...
the very breath of God.

The church that started then is the church that continues now.
The God who came to them in their upper room is the same God comes to us in ours –
in our grief, our fears, our anxieties – and says "peace."
The God who breathed on them, breathes on us,
sending us to be living, breathing stones of God's temple,
to be God's royal priesthood in the world,
proclaiming the good news of the God's love.

Together we live out this call to be church, and there are so many ways to live out this call.
Our photo album proves it.

We see the picture of the early church, but when we turn the page, we see a picture of Basil the Great,
the church father who opened up the first hospital in the fourth century,
breathing God's spirit on those who were ill.

Flip the page again, and there is a snapshot of Martin Luther,
breathing God's spirit by nailing his 95 Theses to the door of the church
and demanding that all people should be considered ministers, not just the people in fancy robes.

Flip another page, and there is the photo of Anne Hutchinson,
a 17th century Bostonian who breathed God's peace by organizing women's Bible studies in her
home
because she thought all women should be able to hear and discuss the scriptures.

Flip again, and we get to the contemporary poet Mary Oliver, who is here in Minneapolis today,

who breathes peace by writing words that connect people with God.

Scattered through the pages are countless other faces,
people who have done deeds big and small.

God breathed into each of them and into each of us, in different ways.
The Spirit leads some of us to prophetic witness,
 some to humble living,
 some to political activism,
 some to quiet fortitude
 some to deeds of kindness
but somehow the Spirit leads all of us to breathe God's peace.

The question is, are we up to the task?
Are we ready to leave our upper rooms?
Can we trust the spirit breathing in us and through us?

Just last week I got a glimpse of this,
 in this very sanctuary.
Those of you that were here may recall the Easter story,
 an interpretive drama that opened our Easter service.
Some of you may recall that I participated in it.

Here's the thing...
I don't consider myself much of an actor,
 really I don't consider myself an actor at all.
Chalk it up to years of bad elementary school plays,
 but it is not an area of comfort for me.
It brings up all my upper room grief, anxieties, and fears.
I don't like making a fool out of myself.
I don't like running the risk of failure.
I get trapped in feeling like I have to be perfect,
 or at least really good,
 and that I can't mess up or let people down.

So when one of the women asked me about being in this drama, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.
Laugh because at first I thought she was kidding.
Cry because if I said yes, I might make a fool out of myself, and if I said no, I might let them down.

So I gave a very internally reluctant yes,
 and proceeded to fret about it for week.
And sure enough at our Saturday morning practice,
 I missed just about every cue I had.
 I pulled out my scarf at the wrong time.
 I ran too fast or two slow,
 and in my head, I thought,
 there is no way I can do this. I am going to ruin this production.

And then it was Saturday night,
 and while I could feel the anxiety creeping in,
 I also began to feel God's presence,
 "Peace be with you. Relax. Do not be afraid."
I began to see that God was inviting me to do something totally different,

totally out of my comfort zone,
and that I should just relax and have fun with it.
And so that's what I did.

I blocked everything else out of my mind and thought I am going to worship God,
and whatever happens, happens.
Well, what happened is that I had more fun in worship than I have had in a long time.
God was more present to me in that moment than in many of the hours I have spent wrestling over
sermons or laboring over prayers...
God was calling me out of my fears and into being a vessel of the Holy Spirit.

That was church for me.
That was being a living stone,
letting God drive out my fears and breathe through me.

Now I can hardly compare last week's liturgical drama to Basil's first hospital, or Martin Luther's 95
Theses, or Mary Oliver's poetry, but that's just it. We don't need to compare.

God spirit blows through each us in different ways at different times, and all of it is worship.
The spirit of God, the breath of God,
enables us to do things we never thought possible, or prudent, or productive.
The breath of God
fends off fear and folly, in favor of fullness of life.
The breath of God
builds and binds the body of Christ.

As Peter writes,
"Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people.
Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

Our job as today's church is to God's people,
to be the bearers of God's breath,
to be the living temple,
God's royal priesthood,
God's holy nation,
proclaiming the mighty acts of the one who called us of the rooms and tombs of our lives
and into the light of God's love.

And so our work continues...

The photo album brought to my ordination
had some blank pages at the end.
I suppose my mom knew life didn't end at 30 and that maybe there would be more milestones to add.

So it is with the church's album, too.
If pictures speak a thousand words, then it is an ongoing story.
And there are blank pages for us to fill.

What snapshots will you leave in book? How will you breathe God's spirit into the world?

Amen.

