

September 10th: Breathe

This Fall we return to the Narrative Lectionary—a year long collection of readings that take us from the origins of God’s people to the first century world. These readings are chosen on purpose, because they help us trace a particular theme throughout our scripture texts—and this year our theme is “Love in Action.” Over the course of the year, we’ll read a wide variety of passages, from Old Testament stories, wisdom literature, prophetic teachings, scenes from the life of Jesus, and instructions for the early church—but in each, there’s a compelling action that is embedded into the narrative. Last year’s theme was “A Family Story,” and we focused on the identity and purpose of God’s beloved children—but this time around, we’ll be taking a closer look at the movement behind that belonging—the verbs that form the foundation of our faith and life together. Of course, love is the most important verb of all, so we’ll also be tracing how God’s love was shown to our spiritual ancestors and discover how God’s love is still being shown to us today.

As we study together, the goal isn’t simply to increase our knowledge of God—the goal is to increase in love towards God and towards each other. So as we read, and as we reflect, I want to challenge all of us to respond to these stories with action—with real, tangible ways that we can each show love to our hurting world. I want us to take these words of wisdom from our text and transform them into positive change in our community—so that our neighborhood, our city, our country, can be a place where God’s love is seen and felt by everyone.

Are we ready to begin? Great, let’s pray together.

Creator God,

Before the dawn of time, your words called all of humanity into being. You spoke into the darkness, and created light and life so that our world would be full of brilliance and beauty. You crafted each of us to carry on that legacy, and we are here on this earth because you have spoken to each of our hearts and created something powerful and lovely inside of us. But sometimes we forget this divine

purpose, we forget that we have been fashioned for greater things than just our daily routine. As we gather in your eternal presence this morning, breathe new inspiration and hope into our tired bodies. Breathe a new revelation into our weary souls so that we are able to live as your beloved children and share your everlasting love with all of creation. Amen.

Ok, let's start off with an easy question: How many of you are breathing right now?

I really hope everyone's hand is in the air, because if you're not breathing, we're gonna have a slight problem in just a few moments.

You probably weren't thinking about breathing this morning—you were just going about your day, doing your normal routine, settling into your chosen seat here in our sanctuary, maybe starting to plan your grocery list in your head as you prepared for another week. For many of us, it happens so automatically, that it never even crosses our mind. Without having to monitor anything, we simply exist: air goes in, air goes out. Rinse and repeat. All day long, all night long. In and out.

Doctors estimate that the average human takes about 22,000 breaths per day—and all of these breaths mean that our lungs are cycling through approximately 14,000 liters of air in just 24 hours. And now we have ways to track those data points that have previously been invisible to us or happening on auto-pilot. My watch monitors something called a “respiratory rate,” and it tells me that when I am asleep, at the moments of my deepest rest, I take about 13 breaths per minute as my body does what it is designed to do. When I'm not thinking or moving or using any willpower at all, my lungs still pull in oxygen, convert it to carbon dioxide and push it back out through my nose. Your body probably does too—Isn't that amazing?

But some of us know that when breathing becomes difficult, something changes. Breathing becomes all that we can think about. When we climb a particularly steep set of stairs, or finish a hard workout, or are dealing with a

medical issue, we begin to notice the labor involved—we hear the sucking in and the whooshing out in a new way. When we struggle with allergies, or get the flu, or have to run a mile in gym class, we start to understand that breathing is in fact the most important work that our body does on our behalf. It is absolutely essential to our survival.

If you were listening closely as our scripture passage was read for us—you might have heard that this has always been the case—breath and breathing has always been the source of our life. And not just our physical life and for our physical bodies—but the foundation of our spiritual being as well. Today we're taking a closer look at one of the two creation stories found in the Book of Genesis, the very first book in our Bible. In this particular creation account, we have the narrative of Adam and Eve—the Bible's first humans.

Let's take a closer look at our text:

Chapter 2, verse 4 begins with this introduction: "This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the LORD God made the earth and the heavens." Early in this story, we learn that the earth is barren, without any shrubs or plants, because God had not yet sent rain or created any waters on the surface. So there's a sense of lifelessness that God intends to fix.

We see this in verse 7, "Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and **breathed** into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being."

Over the next few paragraphs, we learn that this singular creation doesn't fulfill the vision that God has for creation—there's something missing. There's more breathing that needs to happen, more life needs to be created. Verse 21 tells us, "So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man."

This seems to please God—this sense of abundant life—of community and belonging completes the picture of what God intended. The chapter ends with this statement: “And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.” This concluding line is sometimes taken out of context, but in its proper place, it is meant to convey that both of these created beings are fully at peace with themselves, each other, and their surroundings. There was no need for shame, because everything was peaceful, working exactly the way it was intended. We’re supposed to understand that at this moment in time, all living things were in complete harmony. Like a healthy respiratory system, everything functioned naturally without any intervention.

All because of a little bit of breath. All of that came into being because God breathed into the dust. Wholeness and peace were created because of God’s inhale and exhale. Harmony and goodness were the defining characteristics of creation because God this one, small action that we often take for granted, something so routine that it happens automatically.

This idea of God’s breath becomes a theme in the rest of our scripture. Other biblical authors take up this idea of God breathing into humanity and into creation, we see it in various kinds of writing—from poetry, to historical accounts, and the pronouncements of our prophets. It’s all over our Old Testament, and it carries on into our Gospels and into the letter of Paul. Our biblical authors knew the value of breath and knew that it has always been a connection between ourselves and the divine. Breath has always tethered us to each other, breathing has always anchored our souls to our Creator.

Psalms 150, verse 6 says this: “Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD.” The prophet Ezekiel writes in chapter 37:5-6, “This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.” Our friend Job, a man tested by God, receives this wisdom from his friend Elihu: “The Spirit of God has made me; the breath of the Almighty gives me life.” In The Message translation of Psalm

34:1, the poet sings, “I bless God every chance I get; my lungs expand with his praise.”

All of these different expressions, from many different points in our spiritual history, all point back to this one moment in Genesis. But there’s something else underneath the connection between our human stories and the God of our universe.

Our Old Testament, including our passage from Genesis, was originally written in Hebrew—which was the language of the ancient Israelites. Like other Semitic languages such as Ugaritic, Aramaic, Syriac, and Arabic, Hebrew is a complex language and difficult to learn. Not only is it a completely different alphabet, and read right to left instead of left to right, the written text often omits vowels entirely, leaving readers to guess at certain words and sounds. One of the Hebrew words that has been debated for centuries is the name of God. In a Jewish setting, you might hear the phrase “hashem elohim,” hashem meaning the name, and elohim meaning God or deity. You might also hear the word “Adonai,” meaning “my Lord”. But most observant Jews do not say the proper name of God, out of respect for the sacred mystery of the divine.

However, in our Genesis text, God’s name is not hidden—it is written as four simple Hebrew consonants: yod, heh, vav, and heh. In modern English, we see Y-H-W-H. Biblical scholars of the dark ages through the 1600s translated the Hebrew text into Latin, added certain vowels to this name and pronounced it “Jehovah”—but most biblical scholars of today have evidence to suggest those latinized vowels miss the mark just slightly, and prefer the pronunciation “Yahweh.”

And Hebrew language experts argue that the reason there has been such confusion about God’s name is that these four consonants—yod, heh, vav, and heh—are not like the harsh, strong consonants that we might expect. Instead, linguists assert that these four consonants are almost like gasps of air—like little guttural sounds that our mouths make when we yawn or like the sound

that our bodies make when we draw in a deep breath. Together, they form a sound that is more like a heaving sigh or a puff of smoke.

Try it with me now: Yah-weh. Yah-weh. Try it nice and slow: Yah—Weh.

When you think about it, is the name of God the sound of breathing? When the first humans received God's breath, did they also receive the divine name at the essential core of their being? Is the mysterious name of our Creator the same sound that was placed into our bodies at the moment of our own birth? What if the 22,000 breaths that we take every single day are our bodies' way of connecting with this origin story? What if the air in our lungs connects us to a deeper spiritual reality?

I'm not the first preacher to ask these questions, and I certainly won't be the last—but I am here this morning to remind us that our physical bodies—as amazing as they are—are not separate from our spiritual selves—they are, in fact, intimately intertwined. We are a configuration of cells, knit together with DNA, but we are also a soul that is brought alive by the inhale and exhale of our Creator. We are also created from the dust for a purpose—and that purpose involves belonging and relationship and community.

On this day of new beginnings, when we are embarking upon a new adventure, it makes sense to return to this origin story. It makes sense to rewind back to the moment when our spiritual story began, and remind ourselves of the power of that narrative. As we look back to this dawn of creation, we can see that our path forward towards harmony and peace begins with something as simple as a breath. Our hope for a better, more loving, more whole future could find its cornerstone in this ancient name, uttered in the rising and falling of our chests.

So our verb for today is breathe. And not in the autopilot sense, but in a way that is intentional and rooted in our common humanity and common creation.

As you begin this new week, as you prepare for our new vision together, I invite you to notice your breathing. Notice whether it is deep or shallow. Notice whether it is steady or uneven. Notice whether it is on autopilot or a struggle. Notice the rhythm, notice the sounds, notice the sensation of it all. Notice when you are holding your breath, notice when your chest aches. Notice the smallness of it. Notice the vastness of it too.

None of us know when our last breath will be, so let's not take it for granted.

Because my friends, this is what our bodies and souls were made for. This is our divine task—to take in air, and let it expand our lungs. This is our sacred act—to bring life into our bodies, let that life fill us to the brim, and then exhale that life out into the world.

To breathe is to be human, but to breathe is also divine.

Amen.