

Praise for *40 Days with the Holy Spirit*

“A splendid addition to the literature of Christian devotion, biblical study and, yes, mission, for effective mission. Spend 40 days with the author, being open to the Spirit, and you will be challenged and rewarded, better equipped for Christian discipleship and mission. Levison invites us to be honest with ourselves as we allow the Holy Spirit to engage them in everyday life, work, and witness.”

—THOMAS KEMPER,
General Secretary, General Board of Global Ministries,
The United Methodist Church

“Because I get too many requests for blurbs, I have had to say no to most of them in the last months. For this book I am making an exception! Jack Levison will help us retrieve the tragically lost centrality of the Holy Spirit in the mainline Christian world.

Here comes the return of the fire and the wind!”

—RICHARD ROHR, OFM,
Center for Action and Contemplation, Albuquerque, New Mexico

“This new book contains a beautiful selection of scripture passages, personal stories that help unpack those passages, suggested prayers, and most importantly, the invitation to grapple with how we understand the Holy Spirit and how it operates in our lives. The title promises 40 days with the Holy Spirit; I’m confident the book will prompt many more days of reflection than that, and I will be recommending it to those to whom I provide spiritual direction.”

—SUSAN J. STABILE,
Professor of Law and Faculty Fellow for Spiritual Life, University of
St. Thomas, and author of *Growing in Love and Wisdom:
Tibetan Buddhist Sources for Christian Meditation*

“Jack Levison is one of the most inspiring, engaging voices in contemporary Christianity. He combines a scholar’s intimate knowledge of scripture with a writer’s style, empathy, and humor. Every page brims with reverence for God and common-sense wisdom. Here he continues the journey he started in *Fresh Air* by entering into our daily spiritual quest with lessons gleaned from the Bible and prayers wrung from life’s joy, pain, and chaos. I read *40 Days* with admiration for Jack’s humility and awe at his sense of justice toughened by devotion.”

—DAVID LASKIN,
award-winning author of *The Children’s Blizzard*

“Jack Levison’s lively new book invites the Christian community to be reacquainted with the person and ministry of the Holy Spirit. I read it as a Pentecostal pastor/theologian and it provoked me to consider anew how the Spirit is actively at work in my life and in the world. Though there are differences in pneumatology within the body of Christ, all who read this book will have to affirm that the Spirit is moving and Jack has caught its zeal!”

—JOHNATHAN E. ALVARADO,
Senior Pastor, Grace Church International,
Atlanta, Georgia; Professor of Theology, Beulah Heights University

“Jack Levison’s new devotional will guide you into the theme of the Holy Spirit in Scripture, aiming for spiritual formation, not just spiritual information. My favorite part: the simple prayers at the end of each reading. A beautiful, accessible, and soul-nourishing resource!”

—BRIAN D. McLAREN,
author of *We Make the Road by Walking*

“*40 Days with the Holy Spirit* reminded me of Merton’s *Thoughts in Solitude* and Brother Lawrence’s *Practicing the Presence of God*. I believe it’s destined to be a classic for people who long for deeper spirituality.

—MIKE RAKES, Lead Pastor,
Winston-Salem First Church



**40 DAYS WITH
THE HOLY SPIRIT**

Fresh Air for Every Day



Jack Levison



FOREWORD BY EUGENE H. PETERSON



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To my mother
Norma Jeane Levison

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FOREWORD

Jack Levison studies, meditates, prays, and writes of the place of the Holy Spirit in our lives with more skill and understanding than anyone I know. His latest book, *40 Days with the Holy Spirit*, is conspicuous for its lively, down-to-earth conversation in this much neglected and misunderstood aspect of the Christian faith. He insists that this is not a specialist interest, not something for “advanced” Christians to take. He is determined to open the doors of hospitality widely to every last one of us. And he does it.

Under Dr. Levison’s guidance it doesn’t take us long to realize how pervasive the presence of God’s Spirit is throughout our scriptures. In the original languages in which the Bible was written, Hebrew and Greek, a single word (in Hebrew *ruach*; in Greek, *pneuma*) is translated as *air, breath, breeze, gale, angel, demon*, or for a disposition (like a “spirit of”) *lust or jealousy*, depending on the context. This is obscured further by the many uses the word *spirit* or *Holy Spirit* is put to in giving an account of the life of creation and salvation.

Most famously, perhaps, *pneuma* was used by Jesus in conversation with Nicodemus, who was puzzled by Jesus talking about being “born from above”: “The wind [*pneuma*] blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit [*pneuma*]” (John 3:8). The same word is used in a single sentence, first to designate the wind that blows, and then, a few words later, for the spirit that is God’s life-giving breath. Which is to say that you cannot see God but you can see/experience what God does.

This “wind/Spirit” occurs at the beginning of the Bible in the second verse of Genesis and at the very end at Revelation 22:17 as the wind/Spirit gives the final invitation, “Come.” Throughout the Bible, Levison is relentless in bringing into focus the instances of Wind/Air/Breath/Spirit that should keep us aware and responsive to the ways God works in and among us. He discovers Spirit language in Moses and Bezalel, Job and Daniel, Ezekiel and Isaiah, Joel and Zechariah, Elizabeth and Mary, John and Jesus, Peter and Paul, and numerous others as our scriptures tell the story of God entering the lives of men and women in a participating way, the very breath of God breathed into us.

But Jack does more than keep us attentive to the scriptural witness to the continuous and critical place of the Spirit. He also gives witness through stories from his own life. In other words, this is not a Bible study, depersonalized into information. It is more like a companionable witness and conversation that should help us recognize, appreciate, and value God’s “breathing” in us, making his presence known.

Perhaps the greatest gift is the skill and attention that Jack gives to our use of language. “Land of the living” is a frequently recurring phrase in the psalms. It is the land we live in. That’s why it is personal. This book brings that earthiness and immediacy of the biblical text into our world.

If we use language that depersonalizes God into an abstraction or idea or project we lose awareness of the actual wind and breath that are Spirit, and the life leaks out of what we say and write, teach and pray. We are left with nothing but “godtalk”—talk that is *about* God, talk in which God is depersonalized and all that is left is information, manipulation, propaganda, and gossip. But the salvation life is to be lived, not just talked about or written about. If life goes out of our words, if we no longer live what we speak,

the life goes out of us. Then, no matter what we hear or say or read we will most certainly betray the God who “speaks and it comes to be.”

I can guarantee that that will not happen as you read this book. Levison takes his responsibility as seriously as any great Christian writer. He weeds out inauthenticities in words and sentences, freeing them to sparkle and dance. As you read what he writes you will soon be answering him, and participating with him in the “Word made flesh” by the Spirit.

—Eugene H. Peterson
Translator of *The Message*

INTRODUCTION

The church I grew up in, a small church sandwiched between a TV repair shop and a donut store, wasn't big enough to have a youth group. But I cut my teeth on Christianity in that church. We were a little band of harsh-toned New Yorkers who knew how to work hard, to make due, and to have fun together. I learned three things about the Holy Spirit in that church.

Christians receive the Holy Spirit at baptism. Call me nerdy, but I memorized every verse in the New Testament on baptism, verses like Acts 2:38, which you'll find at the tail end of the first recorded sermon in Christian history, when Peter tells his hearers to "repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." The belief that Christians receive the Spirit at baptism was a key marker of my church. I debated endlessly with Lois, my French-horn-playing Baptist friend in high school, who believed that baptism is an act of obedience, which follows but doesn't prompt the reception of the Spirit.

I learned that speaking in tongues was not welcome. We were a church of immigrants. On occasion, local barber Xavier Munisteri would launch out in the middle of Sunday morning worship with a blather of languages I didn't understand. I figured he was speaking Spanish. (He was Italian, but I thought he was Puerto Rican, since the only barbers I'd met, at Hempstead Turnpike's Mr. Haircut—a buck a cut—were Puerto Rican.) Turns out he wasn't speaking Spanish. He was speaking *in tongues*. My mother told me just last year that Xavier was asked to leave. Speaking in tongues was not welcome.

The church also taught me that we could figure out our spiritual gifts. Gifts like teaching, administration, service, and encouragement, which the apostle Paul listed in letters to churches in Corinth and Rome. We filled out long inventories of spiritual gifts, which helped us to identify what part we should play in the body of Christ with our particular gift.

I didn't learn much about the Holy Spirit, did I? I don't even agree with all that I learned. But this I do know. *There is so much more to learn about the Holy Spirit!* So for thirty years I've been hard at it. I taught my first course on the Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul during my first year as a seminary professor back in 1986. I wrote my first article on the Holy Spirit in a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar in 1992. I spent 1994, my first sabbatical leave in Tübingen, Germany, writing my first book on the Holy Spirit, *The Spirit in First-Century Judaism*.

And I've been hard at it ever since. Whenever I write about other topics, I itch to get back to the Holy Spirit. Whenever I'm asked to teach in churches, I teach about the Holy Spirit. Whenever I blog, I tend to blog about the Holy Spirit. Whenever I find my mind wandering, it's usually in the realm of the Holy Spirit.

If you, like me, feel you've still got much more to learn—much more to experience, too—about the Holy Spirit, then this book is for you. It's not a seminary textbook. It's certainly not the final word on the Holy Spirit. It's intended to prompt you to reflect at your own pace and to absorb, slowly and deliberately, the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life, your community of faith, and the world. I hope, too, after you've spent forty days with this book, you'll say, *There is so much more to learn about the Holy Spirit!*

Spirit chatter

Let's talk translation and begin with a brief lesson in ancient languages. Don't worry—this really will be brief. Get your coffee or tea. Relax for a minute while I chatter a bit about a magnificent word—*spirit*.

The Bible was written originally in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. We'll stick to the Hebrew—the earliest language, and the language of what Jews call *Tanak* and Christians the Old Testament. The original Hebrew word for *spirit* conveyed a mind-boggling array of concepts, from breath to breeze, powerful gale, angel, demon, a disposition like (a “spirit of”) lust or jealousy, and the divine presence. That's a remarkable range of meanings, and it's absolutely essential to keep in mind that a single word in Hebrew (*ruach*—the *ch* is pronounced gutturally, as if you're clearing your throat, not as *cha cha cha*) can convey all of these meanings.

You'll see this right away by cracking open a Bible to the first page. Glance at a couple of translations of Genesis 1:1–2, and you'll grasp this.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. (NIV)

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth . . . a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. (NRSV)

Right at the start, in the Bible's sixteenth Hebrew word, we face this question: Is *ruach* wind or Spirit? The meaning of *ruach* is so puzzling, in fact, that the NRSV includes a note to Genesis 1:2 with other possible translations: “*while the spirit of God*” or “*while a mighty wind*.”

All of this may seem confusing, but the Hebrew word *ruach* actually opens the window to a world of mystery, a vista of possibilities that encompass breath, winds, and divine Spirit. It's like the wardrobe that opens to the world of Narnia—into which you are invited to step. It's like an old keyhole you'd peek through to glimpse a hidden room—into which you're invited to look. It's like the passageway Alice falls through to enter Wonderland—into which you are now invited to tumble.

Forty days

Why forty days? That's not a hard question to answer. Moses waited on Mt. Sinai for forty days for the Ten Commandments—twice!¹ Moses sent spies to scope out the Promised Land for forty days.² Philistine giant Goliath taunted Israel for forty days before David struck him dead with his trusty slingshot.³ Famed prophet Elijah escaped from Jezebel for forty days in a cave on Mt. Sinai.⁴ The idiosyncratic prophet Ezekiel lay on his right side for forty days to symbolize the punishment of his people, at the hands of Babylon, for forty years.⁵ God offered ancient Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, forty days to change their ways in the days of Jonah.⁶ Jesus spent forty days in the desert at the start of it all,⁷ and forty days after his resurrection teaching his disciples about the kingdom of God.⁸

Forty days represent waiting and expectation (Moses), discovery (Joshua and Caleb), safety (Elijah), threat (Goliath), grief (Ezekiel), an opportunity to change (Nineveh), preparing for the future or tying up loose ends (Jesus). These forty days, the ones that lie before *you*, may reflect any of these. Are you full of expectation? Ready to explore? Desperate for time away from the fray? Are you confronting some threat? Grieving for your church or your nation? Do you need a block of time to change something about your life? Are

you staring at something new or finishing something up? Wherever you find yourself, you will discover ample resources in *Forty Days with the Holy Spirit*, as you practice the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Seven verbs

Before you read any further, do me a favor. Turn the page and glance at the table of contents, where you'll see seven verbs. There is a sequence to these verbs. They lead from deep within to the world outside.

BREATHING

It's easy in English to distinguish between breath and Spirit, but in Hebrew, breath and Spirit reflect the same word, *ruach*, so it's better to speak of Spirit-breath. In our first days together, we'll become attentive to God's Spirit-breath within each of us.

PRAYING

Settled, able to breathe deeply, we turn to prayer. Not so much prayer as request but prayer as rejuvenation: listening, receiving, and whispering, "Abba. Father."

PRACTICING

A robust spiritual life doesn't grow naturally. It needs tending, with an eye to the long haul rather than to bursts of enthusiasm every now and then.

LEARNING

Eugene Peterson, translator of *The Message*, describes his delight at noticing that the Hebrew word *hagah* describes both a lion *gnawing* its prey (Isaiah 31:4) and someone *meditating* on

Scripture (Psalm 1:2).⁹ A person who meditates on Scripture is like a dog that gnaws on a bone. As learners, we'll discover how gnawing—meditating—on Scripture opens the way to a vibrant experience of the Holy Spirit.

LEADING

There is leadership—then there's *inspired* leadership. This section is about inspired leadership.

BUILDING

Here we'll explore the ingredients that go into vibrant communities of faith.

BLOSSOMING

We'll finish up by discovering how the Holy Spirit helps us to blossom beyond ourselves, beyond the church—and in the world.

Ready, set, go!

I want this book to be something you dive into *and complete*. So I'll end on a practical note with five things you need to keep you going all the way to day 40.

PLAN

First, make a plan to meet daily with this book. Write it in your schedule, the way you would a committee meeting, a coffee date, an essay due. If you don't plan, you probably won't pause—especially not for forty days.

PLACE

Find a comfy place. I learned this one from my wife, Priscilla. Most mornings, when I get up and trundle off to the bathroom, I hear Priscilla chanting the psalms. She sits in her favorite chair in her study with a candle lit beside her. This is *her* spot, her sacred space.

Priscilla looked so cozy in her chair one day that I decided to take my cue from her. I put my own Bible on a table, nestled into my comfy chair—and stared at all the work I had to do. My chair is in my study, and it looks straight at my desk, piled with exams to grade, articles to write, and e-mails to answer. I couldn't pray there at all. I could barely breathe!

So I went elsewhere for my sacred space. I went to the bedroom and found a chair piled high with clothes. Tossing my clothes into the closet, I turned the chair so that it faces the window instead of the room. I put my favorite books on a nearby shelf. I stocked a small basket with a journal, pens, plenty of tea-light candles, and matches. It's spectacular—in an understated sort of way, of course. This is *my* spot—*my* sacred space. I can pray without exams, articles, and e-mails in the corner of my eye. I've even found Priscilla occasionally hiding away in that space. I don't blame her one bit.

Sometimes we don't slip away because we have no place to slip away to. If you want to live for forty days with the Holy Spirit, then find a closet, a chair, a stand of trees—anywhere that's *your* place.

PEN

I'm not sure you caught this detail: I put pens in my basket. Don't laugh. You need a pen that feels good in your hand and writes well. It's aggravating to brew a cup of coffee, settle into a comfy spot, breathe, meditate, and—*sigh*—your pen doesn't write when you start to reflect. Or maybe it writes off and on, so you spend more

time jiggling the pen than reflecting on the passage for the day. If you don't have a good pen, buy one.

PATTERN

Each and every day, you'll build your faith-muscles and develop a more robust life. Here's my best advice on how to make every day—all forty of them—count.

Begin by paying careful attention to God's Spirit-breath in you until your breathing is settled.

Read each Scripture passage slowly, maybe two or three times.

Meditate on this passage with the help of what I've written. Dig up one nugget of insight every day.

Take pen in hand and reflect on the meaning of Scripture for yourself. I decided not to give you prompts—the sort of one-sentence essay topics my kids got in high school English and history classes. You don't need *me* to prompt your writing. Write whatever comes to mind.

After you complete your written reflections, focus again on God's Spirit-breath in you, as you prepare to settle one last time for prayer. Just breathe for as long as you like—until you are settled.

End with prayer. I've written prayers for you, but don't feel obligated to use them. Pray however you want.

PATIENCE

Finally, *be patient with yourself*. If you miss a day, come back to this book when you can. And remember, the day that seems least valuable may turn out, in the surprising world of the Spirit, to be the most significant.

STARTING OUT

DAY 1

READ Genesis 1:1-2

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a Spirit from God swept over the face of the waters.

MEDITATE

The Bible begins simply—with soup. Murky, muddy soup. Right where many of us live, smack in the middle of chaos, too much to do in too little time, expectations left unmet, disorganization and disappointment and disasters waiting to happen. The only glimmer of hope for creation rests in the appearance of the Spirit of God hovering over this primal soup, this abyss, this deep. The mere mention of the Spirit, in the Bible's first lines, introduces the possibility of order, of birth, of meaning. But how can the Spirit put soup in order?

That is a question Priscilla and I have been asking for thirty-two years. We decided many years ago not to have two full-time jobs once our kids were born. We didn't want to become the harried, two-career couple we knew we would easily become, given our intense personalities. We wanted the *order* of Genesis, not its *chaos*.

Then our daughter was born on a bitter cold March night on Chicago's north side. We went from *couple* to *family*. From the moment of her birth, our heads began to spin, as nurses swept the tiny creature from her mother's arms and away to pediatric intensive care for the next five days.

There were sleepless nights, of course, and the birth of our son afterwards and the first day of school for both of them and softball tournaments and choir concerts and puberty and algebra and adolescence (I've forgotten in what order) and college applications and good-byes—too many to count. All of this on top of scrubbing pots and pans, slathering cream cheese on bagels, mowing the lawn, taking out the garbage, folding piles of laundry. And we aren't getting any younger. When I asked the doctor why I was getting my first cortisone shot in my lower back for a herniated disc—L4-5 to be exact—he smirked, “Guys in their forties.” *Sigh*. That was a decade ago. Sometimes I'm exasperated by the utter chaos. I'm exhausted by the barrage of demands. My head spins like a top at the responsibilities we bear, not just for things, but for people in our charge.

How can the Spirit of God wrest order out of chaos?

By hovering. This is the Spirit's first activity in the Bible.

In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson translates Genesis 1:2 in this way: “God's Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss.” Perfect! The verb *hover* or *sweep*—and here, *brood*—which offers the first glimpse of the Spirit's activity in the Bible, occurs only once elsewhere in the Old Testament, when God is an eagle that “stirs up its nest, and *hovers* over its young; as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions” (Deuteronomy 32:11–12). This is tender care, powerful pinions grasping Israel's neck to “set him atop the heights of the land” (32:13). The Spirit of God, at the birth of creation, hovers over an expectant earth, broods like a bird over the watery abyss—an eagle-like Spirit poised with powerful wings over a fledgling creation.

When we first meet the Spirit, we encounter the majesty of a bird of prey plucking its young and carrying them to safety. The threat of chaos is simply no match for the eagle's presence.

With nearly six decades under my belt, it's no shock that I've met the disaster of chaos—dreams shattered and hopes crumbled in my clenched fist. I've been bewildered and confused deep in my soul at promises broken. My heart has ached, not metaphorically but physically, with disappointment.

But I've experienced, too, the Spirit of God hovering like an eagle, wings spread, pinions extended, ready to reach and pluck and soar. This isn't the most inviting image of care I've ever known, but it may be the most potent because this Spirit, this eagle, is fearless, undaunted by unformed muck and mire. What threat can a bowl of cosmic soup pose to an eagle that rides the currents above?

At this point in the Bible—about the sixteenth word—God hasn't yet dipped a ladle into the soup, pouring some out as mountains, some as valleys, some as coasts. But God's Spirit is there already, above the dark deep with the promise of confusion come to order, with the hope of muck made into mountains and soup into seas. I know what that Spirit has meant for us, our family, for me over the years, and I hope to offer, too, something of what that Spirit can mean for you in the days ahead—a rare, elusive blend of stability, hope, and challenge.

REFLECT



BREATHE 

PRAY

Holy Spirit

With your wind, stir my soul

With your words, order my day

With your wings, gather me in

And I will be grateful

I will be glad

Amen

BREATHING

DAY 2

READ Job 27:3-4

As long as my breath is in me and the spirit of God is in my nostrils, my lips will not speak falsehood, and my tongue will not utter deceit.

MEDITATE

Job plunks himself down, bone weary, on an infamous ash heap. He has lost everything—his sons and daughters, his livelihood, his house, and now his health. He is abandoned on the ash heap, scraping his wounds with the sharp-edged fragments of clay pots.

Here in the valley of the shadow of death a beleaguered man protests that he would never speak a false word as long as he lives. “As long as my breath is in me and the Spirit of God is in my nostrils,” Job mutters, “my lips will not speak falsehood, and my tongue will not utter deceit.” Here is the bare-bones expression of faith: the Spirit of God inspires us even—*especially*—at the doorstep of death. The Spirit of God inspires us even—*especially*—when we let the breath in our lungs roll over our tongues in words full of integrity and truth.

The Spirit in Job is not the power of victorious living—at least not victorious living in the sense of escape from illness and poverty and grief. The Spirit in Job is not the source of abundant life—at least not abundant life with a permanent smile full of bright white teeth and all the trappings of security and success. The Spirit in Job doesn’t manufacture what’s astonishing—miracles and healing and brilliant sermons—at least not for this exhausted human being.

This Spirit is simply breath—and not very much of it at all. Job is exhausted, *winded*, we might say: short on God’s wind, short on God’s breath, short on God’s Spirit. But he has just enough Spirit-breath to open his dry, cracked, dying lips and say, “As long as my breath is in me and the spirit of God is in my nostrils, my lips will not speak falsehood, and my tongue will not utter deceit.”

Three small, short, seemingly insignificant words we nearly pass over—*as long as*—show us that Job is not making his faith up as he goes. This little phrase, *as long as*, comes from Israel’s book of poetry. The steely resolve of the Psalms fuels Job’s conviction:

I will sing to the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have being. (Psalm 104:33)

I will praise the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praises to my God all my life long. (Psalm 146:2)

Like the poets whose psalms he has memorized, Job lives along the hard edge between death and life, with the Spirit-breath nearly gone, his words no more than a protest whispered into the wind. But there, on the ash heap, *as long as* he still lives, *as long as* God’s Spirit-breath is in him, Job will speak the truth.

Job gets it. He knows that inspiration happens in the fragile fragment of life that inhabits the valley of the shadow of death—only as long as he lives and breathes. Life in the Spirit is not just a moment’s pleasure, a miracle here or there, but a habit. And that habit is carved out of the cliffs of chaos and despair *as long as* there remains a whiff of God’s Spirit-breath in us.

REFLECT



BREATHE 

PRAY

Holy Spirit

As long as I live, let me breathe out God's praise

While I still live, let me exhale God's truth

And with death around me

When health drops away

Let me breathe out God's truth

Let me sing, soft but strongly, God's praise

Amen

DAY 3



READ Job 32:16–20

And am I to wait, because they do not speak, because they stand there, and answer no more? I also will give my answer; I also will declare my opinion. For I am full of words; the spirit within me constrains me. My heart is indeed like wine that has no vent; like new wineskins, it is ready to burst. I must speak, so that I may find relief; I must open my lips and answer.

MEDITATE

Job's brash, young companion, Elihu, is furious (Job 32:2–5). One hundred percent unmitigated miffed. He's peeved at Job's self-justification. (Is anybody *that* righteous?) He's angry at the old geezers who stand around and blame Job. You remember them, right? They scratch their heads at Job's predicament, rub their chins, shuffle their feet—and talk. They talk and talk and talk, blathering on, trying to figure this out: If Job is righteous, why is he suffering?

Elihu has decided to wait before saying a word because they are older and supposedly wiser. But now he can't hold it in a moment longer. Deference be damned!

Elihu has listened and learned that age doesn't necessarily make one wise. We know he's right. We've seen old people who are downright ornery and selfish, and we vow never to become like them. So Elihu says it right out there:

But I see I was wrong—it's God's Spirit in a person,
the breath of the Almighty One, that makes wise human insight possible.
The experts have no corner on wisdom;
getting old doesn't guarantee good sense. (Job 32:8–9, THE MESSAGE)

Elihu is right about two things. First, the Spirit is a life-giving presence in us. “Spirit” and “breath” go hand in hand. We can call this core of God’s vitality in us *Spirit* at one moment, *breath* at another. In every moment, *Spirit-breath* is God’s life in us. Elihu is right about something else, too. This Spirit-breath, not age, brings wisdom. A piling up of years doesn’t transform us into sages; the steady cultivation of God’s Spirit-breath throughout a lifetime of virtue and learning does.

But Elihu is only half-right. He mistakenly believes that he has wisdom because he has lost control, because he can’t hold his tongue. What does he gather from this lack of control? That it must be the Spirit-breath that engorges his mouth.

The word *constrain*, describing the work of the Spirit in our passage today (Job 32:16–20), more often than not means “lay siege-works against.” A siege could be so devastating that the Israelites, it was predicted, would eat their own children to stay alive (Deuteronomy 28:53–57). The word *constrain* is used of Delilah’s relentless nagging of Samson to let her know the mystery of his superhuman strength (Judges 16:16). Like Samson, Elihu can’t resist—or so he thinks—the Spirit-breath travelling up his throat, over his tongue, and out of his mouth in a torrent of words. The Spirit-breath of God, in short, lays siege-works against his self-control, prompting his self-claimed wisdom to echo on the ash heap where Job sits.

He’s wrong. Just plain wrong. Being overwhelmed isn’t a sign of the Spirit. Losing control isn’t the hallmark of inspiration. We know this because Elihu’s words come down like a hammer on a disconsolate Job. Elihu’s is a petty compassion. “See, before God I am as you are; I too was formed from a piece of clay” (33:6). Really? A strong young man full of energy claiming to be like a defeated old man on an ash heap. They both started with dust (Genesis

2:7)—true enough—but they are decades, diseases, and devastating losses apart.

Elihu has yet to learn that a few words, held back cautiously, then spoken carefully is inspiration. A lesson hard learned, held deep within, then divulged in a whisper—this too is the sound of Spirit-breath.

REFLECT



BREATHE 

PRAY

Holy Spirit, prompt me to wait
to pause
to hear my own breath

Holy Spirit, teach me to listen
to deliberate
to consider your own breath

Holy Spirit, prod me to speak
in hushed tones
in wisdom whispered

Amen

DAY 4



READ Daniel 5:11 - 12

There is a man in your kingdom who is endowed with a spirit of the holy gods. In the days of your father he was found to have enlightenment, understanding, and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods. Your father, King Nebuchadnezzar, made him chief of the magicians, enchanter, Chaldeans, and diviners, because an excellent spirit, knowledge, and understanding to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve problems were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Beltshazzar. Now let Daniel be called, and he will give the interpretation.

Psalm 46:10

Be still, and know that I am God!

MEDITATE

I squirmed in Mrs. Shreck's first grade classroom. She barked, "Sit still, John!" Then, exasperated, she pleaded, "Sit on your hands!" That way, I guess, I wouldn't bother other students, and I would, in theory at least, develop the skill of sitting still. (It never took. I never did.)

To this day, when I hear the words, "Be still, and know that I am God," from Psalm 46, I can't help but think of Mrs. Shreck's classroom. My wife, Priscilla, doesn't have a similar reaction to this psalm because she is much better behaved than I am and doesn't share my lifelong struggle with squirming.

Just this morning, Priscilla and I were talking about those words, *be still*, from Psalm 46 because she is preparing to lead a retreat titled "Into Stillness." As we talked, Priscilla asked me the meaning of the Hebrew verb that is translated *be still*. To my relief, the Hebrew word doesn't mean "Sit still, John!" but *let go, abandon*.

That is exactly what Daniel, of lion's den fame, did. He let go and abandoned. Here's what I mean.

Daniel was taken into exile by the Babylonians, who planned to train him and a cluster of other men to take charge of the captive Israelites. For three long generations, Daniel astonished Babylonian and Persian rulers, who acknowledged that Daniel had an *excellent* spirit in him. This length of time—three generations—tells us three things about the Spirit.

First, the Spirit's not intermittent, a divine presence that comes and goes, arrives and leaves again and again. The Spirit doesn't pop in, pull off a miracle, and head out. The Spirit is the durable presence of God from first breath to last.

Second, in a person such as Daniel, who's obviously taken hold of the right end of the stick, this lifelong Spirit-breath is *excellent*. Now excellent doesn't mean A+ work. It's not the kind of excellent penmanship that would have prompted a dour Mrs. Shreck to stick a little red adhesive star onto the top of the page. (I saw this happen, just not to me.) *Excellent* (*yattira'* in Aramaic) means something else: *to the nth degree*. The fiery furnace, for example, was *excellent* or *excessively* (*yattira'*) hot—super hot. The statue of Nebuchadnezzar was *excellent*, *excessively* (*yattira'*) bright—super bright or blinding in its brilliance. In a vision, a fourth beast was “terrifying and dreadful and *exceedingly* strong—super strong—and “*exceedingly* (*yattira'*) terrifying”—super scary. The Spirit in Daniel was *excellent* (*yattira'*) as well—super Spirit, Spirit as Spirit was meant to be, the essence of Spirit—full, pure, wise—Spirit to the nth degree.

The third insight we garner about the Spirit is that Daniel was still. None of the ways in which we typically talk about the Spirit applies here. The Spirit isn't poured out on Daniel. The Spirit doesn't rush or rest upon him. He doesn't pray for the Spirit, request it, yearn for

it, or even receive the Spirit. The Spirit takes no action in the book of Daniel—except to *be* in him.

The Spirit in the book of Daniel is unhinged from accomplishment, unattached to achievement. In fact, what Daniel does is the opposite of achievement, the undoing of accomplishment: when the Babylonians ply their princes with royal wines and royal foods, Daniel declines. No, thank you. Keeping kosher, eating vegetables—these will do just fine. For a person of such simplicity, for whom basic food laws trump the promise of imperial leadership and the allure of success, the Spirit is a reservoir of wisdom that suffuses Daniel's character over the course of three generations and two empires.

Daniel let go and abandoned—which is certainly different from . . . *sitting still!*

REFLECT



BREATHE 

PRAY

Holy Spirit

I have nothing to ask of you

Nothing to request from you

Nothing to yearn for

Nothing but this—

To let go of ambition

To abandon acquisition

Nothing to yearn for

Nothing but you

Amen

DAY 5

READ Ezekiel 37:1-10

GOD grabbed me. GOD's Spirit [ruach]¹¹ took me up and set me down in the middle of an open plain strewn with bones. He led me around and among them—a lot of bones! There were bones all over the plain—dry bones, bleached by the sun.

He said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"

I said, "Master GOD, only you know that."

He said to me, "Prophesy over these bones: 'Dry bones, listen to the Message of GOD!'

"GOD, the Master, told the dry bones, "Watch this: I'm bringing the breath [ruach] of life to you and you'll come to life. I'll attach sinews to you, put meat on your bones, cover you with skin, and breathe life into you. You'll come alive and you'll realize that I am GOD!"

I prophesied just as I'd been commanded. As I prophesied, there was a sound and, oh, rustling! The bones moved and came together, bone to bone. I kept watching. Sinews formed, then muscles on the bones, then skin stretched over them. But they had no breath [ruach] in them.

He said to me, "Prophesy to the breath [ruach]. Prophesy, son of man. Tell the breath [ruach], 'GOD, the Master, says, Come from the four winds [ruach]. Come, breath [ruach]. Breathe on these slain bodies. Breathe life!'"

So I prophesied, just as he commanded me. The breath entered them and they came alive! They stood up on their feet, a huge army. (THE MESSAGE)

MEDITATE

A few years ago, a friend whose husband had died talked about her delayed reaction to his death. She'd had to take care of her children—now more so than ever—so she didn't have time to grieve. Then, about a year later, her dog ran in front of a car and was killed. She and her husband had taken that dog to agility classes, where it had bounced and lurched in sheer pleasure. When

she found out the dog had died, my friend stopped. Finally. Not just chores and parenting and work. She stopped breathing. She couldn't breathe—the grief was so heavy on her.

People will sometimes say that grief feels like an elephant stomping on your chest. You can't breathe. You can't even gasp for air. There isn't an ounce of *ruach* left to give life. There's only grief.

An elephant had stomped, in our passage today, on Israel's chest. That elephant was Babylon, a cold-blooded empire that destroyed Jerusalem, pillaged its temple, violated its land, and exiled its leaders. Babylon left Israel with only shards of hope, with dreams in tatters. Ezekiel, an idiosyncratic but brilliant prophet, knew what this nation had become: a valley filled with very many, very dry bones. He knew this because the Spirit-wind of God had thrown Ezekiel smack into the middle of the pile, where he climbed on and clawed these bones, where he peered beyond the cusp of death at a world with bones clattering, fresh sinews laid on top like a linen tablecloth, flesh draped over the sinews, skin wrapping the flesh.

At the heart of this clattering and clothing and coating is *ruach*, God's Spirit-breath. God is about to breathe new life into Israel. *But not quite yet.* The process of renewal, revitalization, is protracted rather than instantaneous, prolonged rather than immediate, a stunning sequence of life-giving. A promise of the Spirit is followed by

- a promise of sinews and flesh and skin and Spirit-breath is followed by
- bones clattering and coming together are followed by
- bodies restored with sinews and flesh are followed by
- no life, not yet anyway, which is followed finally by
- inbreathing, the rush of Spirit-breath-wind from the four corners of the earth into very many, very dry bones bleached in the desert sun.

Whew! How difficult the process of regeneration can be. How difficult it is to get the elephant off a broken people's chest. How difficult it is to learn to breathe again.

A friend of mine who once worked for an international aid agency told me how workers deal with starving children. At the acute stages of starvation, the body shuts down. It is numb, no longer ravenous, barely hungry. Aid workers respond by placing sugar water on the lips of starving children. Eventually, the fortunate ones begin again to feel hunger. When they do, they hurt intensely, their bodies wracked with pain. They scream, bellow, and wail, as their small bodies begin again to beg for water and bread. They are resurrected, but the midwife of new life is overwhelming pain.

The same is true of each of us, spiritually. We adopt compromised values that numb us to real life. We accept practices that inoculate us from real faith. We absorb distractions that derail us from pure spirituality. We become, in a paraphrase of a Greek word the apostle Paul adopted, *sarkikos*: "merely human." Our longings shut down. We stop hungering and yearning for God altogether. We need resurrection.

For some of us on this path, there may be a dramatic rush of the Spirit, a sensational conversion, which brings us back to life. For others of us who don't just lack hope but reject it and give up on the promise of new life, repairs may be necessary *before* the Spirit rushes to fill us with bone-clattering, despair-shattering new life. Learning to breathe again won't be easy.

For lifeless communities, too, which have slipped into the throes of death, the process of rejuvenation may take a long time. Bones need to be reattached, sinews re-laid, flesh restored before the Spirit-breath of God rushes to renew. There is hard work to do, relationships to be restored, sleeves to be rolled up in these communities long before the Spirit pulses with new life.

Sometimes, life arrives step by step. New life comes in stages. As the prophet puts it, only at the end of the process, after bones have rattled, sinews covered the bones, skin shielded the sinews, and the Spirit-winds rustled themselves into a storm of life. Only after all of this could it be said that the Spirit *entered them and they came alive!* *They stood up on their feet, a huge army.*

REFLECT



PRAY

Holy Spirit

I've forgotten how to breathe deeply
 fearlessly
 joyfully

Afraid as I am that life will come and knock the wind right out of me

Mid-breath

So I breathe in small gasps

quick huffs
 short sighs,

Afraid as I am that life will come and knock the wind right out of me

Mid-breath

Gather a windstorm from the four corners of the earth

Rattle my tired bones

Stretch my weary sinews

Renew my parched flesh

And bring me back, Holy Spirit

back to life
 back to living
 back to hope

Amen

DAY 6



READ John 20:19–23

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

MEDITATE

I’m pretty skilled at some things—like keeping God at a distance. It’s really not such a difficult skill to develop. After all, God *the Father* has the ring of authority. God *the Son* takes us to a distant time two thousand years ago and a teacher who certainly wasn’t cozy; there’s nothing cozy about the command, “Take up your cross and follow me.” But I’m always pulled up short in my attempt to keep God at arm’s length by God *the Spirit*. I feel the *ruach*-wind. I inhale and exhale the *ruach*-breath. I live the *ruach*—period.

You don’t have to look very far to discover inhaling and exhaling in this vivid scene from the Gospel of John. It’s intimate from the start—a stunningly private scene that occurs behind locked doors among dear friends. The scene begins with a friendly greeting and involves a private glimpse of Jesus’s wounds. Then Jesus does something odd, even shocking: he breathed in them. Um, excuse me? We know that Jesus could get involved in shocking situations. He spit on the eyes of the blind, laid his hands on the sick, had his

feet caressed with hair and washed with tears, and even washed his disciples' feet. But nowhere else does Jesus breathe *in* someone.

He doesn't do it here, either, you might say. He breathed *on* them—not *in* them. But translators usually avoid the appalling intimacy of inbreathing by saying that Jesus “breathed *on* them,” in the way, I suppose, we might breathe *on* our glasses or a mirror before cleaning them with a rag. This is a mistake. The Greek verb for *breathe in* is used first in the Bible of God's breathing in Adam at the birth of the human race (Genesis 2:7). It is used again when the prophet Elijah lies sprawled out on a dead widow's son, face to face, and breathes life back into him (1 Kings 17:17–24). It is used still again when the prophet Ezekiel, in the passage we reflected on yesterday, describes the inbreathing of the dead and dried bones that rattle back to life when the Spirit enters them (Ezekiel 37:9–10). In each case, Spirit-breath enters into a body to bring it to life. Adam, once dust, now pulses with life. The widow's son, once dead, comes alive, turning a mother's bereavement to delight and praise. Israel, once a hopeless heap of bleached bones, turns into a nation looking to its future. And finally, in a private upper room, it occurs again. This time, Jesus gives to his friends the newfound authority of the Spirit, to forgive or not—but not from arm's length. The very personal act of inbreathing turns into a fresh call for his frightened and timid friends.

Breathing into someone is more intimate, more intense, more indiscreet than breathing *on* could ever be. Why? Because breathing *in* looks very much like a kiss. Not a kiss on the cheek, like Judas's kiss, but a kiss square on the mouth. Jesus's relationship with his dearest friends runs deep, and his final gift to them, the Spirit, is deeply intimate, sealed, as it is, with a kiss.

When our daughter, Chloe, was just a toddler, she would climb onto my lap and perch on my thighs so that we were face-to-face.