

BREATHE IN, BREATHE OUT

A Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter, April 11, 2010

Text: John 20:19-31

When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

A Bible concordance lists all the passages in the Bible that use each word. When you compare those passages with each other, you can often build a richer understanding of a particular word or concept, even if you are doing it in English rather than the original Greek or Hebrew.

I checked a concordance for the word "breathed," as in "when he had said this he breathed on them." This is what I learned:

In the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the word "breathed" occurs a total of fourteen times.

Four times the word "breathed" is used when describing the death of our Lord Jesus on the cross. Each of the four gospels uses the same expression. For example, Mark 15:37 says "Then Jesus gave a loud cry and *breathed his last*."

Four times the word "breathed" is used in describing the death of one of the patriarchs of Israel: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and also Ishmael. They, too, are said to *breathe their last*.

Four times the word "breathed" is used in an account of the destruction of a population of a city during a war. This occurs in Joshua and Judges. For example, in Joshua 11 we read, "And they put to the sword all who were in it, utterly destroying them; there was *no one left who breathed*, and he burned Hazor with fire."

So an even dozen times the word "breathed" is used negatively, about death. That is, about *not* breathing. About breathing no more.

Which leaves two times to look at, and those are both positive. *Very* positive. One of those is in today's Gospel reading; the other in Genesis 2, the creation account.

In Genesis 2 verse 7 we read: "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."

All the cultures in the world use the obvious metaphors of breath and blood to talk about life. Because if you lose either, you cannot live. You need both to live. So it is natural that the story of the creation of humanity would be told as the story of when we were *given breath*. God “breathed” into our nostrils the “breath” of life. We needed bones, muscle, kidneys, etc., but we weren’t *alive* until breath was blown into our nostrils.

God created us; he made us alive, when he breathed into us the breath of life.

Now for today’s Gospel: Look at this: “When he had said [‘Peace be with you; as the Father sent me, so I send you.'], he **breathed on them** and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

Here was Jesus, having his very first conversation with his disciples following his resurrection from the dead. So what did he do to them on this very special occasion, according to John?

He created them! He made them into living beings.

Here we have a powerful metaphor at work. When Jesus looked at those poor fellows, what did he see? They were scared to death! They were useless! They were so afraid that the Judeans who killed him were going to find them and kill them, that they had gone into hiding and were keeping the door locked. They were “holding their breath,” afraid something awful was going to happen to them.

Jesus, looking at them, loved them; and he gave them new life, new purpose, by breathing back into their nostrils the breath of life.

I am not so sure this is just a coincidence, that when the Bible tells about God creating humanity it says he “breathed” into them and they became living beings; and that when Jesus creates the church it says that he breathed into them and gave them the Holy Spirit—which is to say, the Holy Breath, the *hagia pneuma*. Jesus was indeed creating something new. He was creating us as something new in the world, based on his resurrection.

The first thing he said was “Peace be with you.” He didn’t just mean “chill out.” He meant: “My peace I give to you. Go and live within it, and share it. Expand it. Extrapolate from it. Be excited about it. Let it calm you down. Let it make you courageous. Etc. And he wasn’t just talking about peace as an absence of disturbance. He meant peace as in having strong, inviolate relationships of love with one another and with your God. This peace is not a place to die; it is a place to live.

Then he said, “As the father sent me, so I send you.” He was creating us into a community that is on a mission. A mission that involves us in making sure that forgiveness of sins reaches people who need it, so that the peace of God can become a property of everyone in the world. We don’t get peace so we can wallow in it; we get it so we can make it and share it.

Thus Jesus spoke to the spooked disciples. But before they could come to life and act like his friends once again, he had to make them come to life. Otherwise they would just sit there forever like manikins or couch potatoes. He had to *breathe* into them the breath he himself had just received, when he had been raised from the dead.

Once he did, he was able to entrust to them a mission—to spread the forgiveness of sins which was available on his account.

Breathe in, breathe out.

“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

The life of the Christian, and the life of the Christian church, is not just half of that phrase. It does not consist solely of getting inspired, so that we can feel spiritual. Nor does it consist solely of going out and breathing on others. We breathe in the Spirit, and we breathe it out. Like Jesus. Like the disciples.

Breathe in, breathe out.

Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

We love, because he has first loved us.

Blessed . . . to be a blessing.

Breathe in, breathe out.

It is not just the rhythm of the eleven disciples’ lives, it is the rhythm of our lives, that throughout our lives we should seek to be filled with the grace of God, so that we can minister the grace of God.

Our second reading today, from the book of Revelation, shows this in verse 6:

Inhale? “To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and

Exhale? “made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father . . .”

Breathe in . . . breathe out.

As priests, all of us, we stand between God and the world. Between (on the one hand) God, the creator of heaven and earth, who has made himself known to us

in Jesus Christ as the one who loves to forgive and redeem and salvage, and (on the other hand) a world that is in great need of forgiving and redeeming and salvaging. We stand between, as instruments of God's redemption, every single one of us, [even and especially the seven youth who are being confirmed today,] gifted with the Gospel we breathe in and tasked with the Gospel we breathe out, as well as the praise of God which we sing, for the sake of the world. Our faithfulness in breathing out depends on our faithfulness in breathing in not just air—anybody can do that—but the Good News about our resurrected Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. When our hearts and lungs are filled with that, we can be a real blessing to the world.

Peace be with you who breathe the Holy Breath, thanks to Jesus. Amen.

