

April 23, 2006  
Genesis 2:4b-7; John 20:19-22  
First Parish Church UCC  
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## *Breath of God*

A few years ago, a parishioner told me that she and her daughter were riding home in the car when her daughter remarked (apparently out of the blue), *Well, we're all God's robots.* The mother, I think, was wondering what were we teaching in Sunday school? However her daughter continued, *Well, not really robots. But we have God's batteries in us and when we're full of it then we go around doing good things. But then when we start getting a little low we start using bad language, and then lower, we start doing bad things...then when we get really, really low we do real bad things.*

I love how this little girl took an image from her everyday life to help her reflect spiritually. This is certainly not a biblical image. They didn't have batteries in biblical times. But, from her own experience, this girl knew that somehow batteries turned something that appeared "lifeless" into something that appears to have "life." She sensed that somehow God's Spirit and our spirits connect within us to energize us for life.

Both of today's scripture readings speak to exactly this. The central image in today's scripture readings is breath as the medium for the spirit of God.

This may be a common image for some of you and it may be a new thought for others. The one group I know who has already paid attention to their breathing

this morning is the choir. Learning to use their breaths and use them fully and with focus makes their ministry to us possible. For just a moment I invite you to notice your breathing. Do you only breathe way up high in your chest? Or do you fill your lungs fully, allowing your abdomen to rise and fall as well?

Breathing is an amazing thing. Most of the time, thankfully, we breathe without having to pay any conscious attention to it. But then there are times when we catch our breath, hold our breath, or even lose our breath and we are suddenly very aware. Or if you have asthma, emphysema or some other respiratory condition you know every day not to take breathing for granted.

Breath is the sign of the beginning of a life and a sign of the ending of a life. When a baby is born, you may find yourself holding your breath until you hear the baby's first cry, and then there is a collective sigh of relief and joy from everyone in the room.

At the other end of life, we are just as focused on breath. As any of you who have sat vigil with someone who is dying know, you wait, and watch, and wonder "Is this the last breath?" And when it is the last breath there is a profound sense that something more than just the physical movement of air, which we call breath, that has left the body. The spirit is gone.

This awareness of the intertwining of breath and spirit is expressed in the passage from Genesis. There is a word in Hebrew, *ruah*, that can be translated “wind, breath, or spirit.” The Hebrews didn’t even try to separate breath from spirit. In this one word all those meanings are intertwined. We first come across the word in the opening verses of Genesis where “the spirit of God” moves over the face of the waters.

It is this same word that we encounter in Genesis 2 when God forms *adam* from the *adama* (the human from the ground). We begin as dust.

Someone sent me a fun email this week that relates to this image.

*“Dear Lord,” the preacher began with arms extended and a rapturous look on his upturned face, without you we are but dust...”*

*He would have continued, but at that moment one very obedient little girl (who was listening carefully) leaned over to her mother and asked quite audibly, “Mommy WHAT is butt dust?” Church was pretty much over at that point...*

However, in Genesis, dust is just the beginning. When God breathes into the earth creature the *ruah*, the breath of life, it is just the beginning of the human journey. This story has been told and retold and retold thousands and thousands of times. One version that captures my imagination comes from James Weldon Johnson, an African American poet from the early 1900s, who, interestingly, had a summer home in Wiscasset. In his collection called

*God’s Trombones*, there is a piece called “The Creation.” Part of it goes like this:  
*Up, up from the bed of the river, God scooped the clay. And by the bank of the river (God) kneeled ... down...*

*And then, the Great God Almighty who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky who flung the stars to the most far corners of the night, who molded the earth in the middle of his hand*

*This great God,*

*Like a mammy bending over her baby, Kneeled down in the dust,*

*Toiling over a lump of clay*

*Until God shaped it into (God’s) own image.*

*Then, into it, (God) blew the breath of life.*

*And (the hu) man became a living soul.*

What an incredibly powerful image, this *ruah*! The movement of God, the spirit of God, that first called forth life from the void is the very same spirit, the very breath of life that imparts life to the earth creature. With every breath we take we receive not only oxygen but also the movement of the spirit within and among us.

This image is reinforced in today’s gospel lesson, where the post resurrection Jesus appears to the disciples who are gathered in a house. It is the first day of the week, after the crucifixion. The disciples have locked the doors for they are afraid. I bet their breathing has not been steady for days. I suspect, at times, they found themselves holding their breath in anxious fretting. (Have you ever noticed yourself holding your breath when you are anxious?) They probably gasped at the arrest in the night. At times, they likely, have been wracked with sobs.

Their breath was taken away and their spirits are deflated as well. And then, Jesus is among them, with the words of comfort, "Peace be with you." At first they can't believe it until they see the wounds in his hands and side. He comforts them but he doesn't leave them there. He challenges them with a mission to go forth, "As God has sent me, so I send you." So what does he give them for this mission? A suite of armor to protect them from the Roman army and the Jewish authorities? A debit card to cover their expenses? The newest magazine on church growth?

No. *He breathed on them and said, "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."* Forgiveness has a power all its own. Jesus inspires them with a ministry of compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation.

This is no ordinary breath. This is holy CPR. Jesus is resuscitating his followers, who, at that moment, must have felt like their hopes, their dreams, their very lives had died along with him. It was as if their lives had turned back to the dust from which they had come. Jesus' breathing the Holy Spirit on them is a second – a new creation. It is a breath that turned the disciples into a mighty wind that stirred up the world. The breath of God is on the move.

The breath of God is still on the move.

When I was little, if you had asked me about prayer, I would have clasped my hands together and said that is prayer. As I got older, I would have told you prayer is the words I say to talk with God. It wasn't until I went to seminary,

and was in a class on Christian Spirituality that I was exposed to the idea of paying attention to breath as a form of prayer. I think that's because praying with breath has not been a prominent spiritual practice in Western Protestant tradition. However, as we can see in today's scriptures the image of the intertwining of breath and spirit is imbedded deep in our own tradition.

In the Spiritual Growth Groups that met on Mondays during Lent, we used a book by Joyce Rupp, called *The Cup of our Life*. In this book she suggested different spiritual practices that we could use each day. One practice was a breathprayer. Some people found this practice to be very helpful. Others didn't like it at all. That makes sense. Different spiritual practices resonate with different people, for we have different spiritual personalities. However, I would encourage you to try it, if you haven't already.

Some people simply pay attention to their breath and try to allow all words and thoughts to simply pass by. Others focus on particular words during the in breath and other words on the out breath. The words can vary.

So in the next few moments of silent meditation, I invite you to experience breath praying. On the in breath you might think *the breath of God*, and on the out breath *among us*.

For indeed, the breath of God is on the move among us.

