

Why Jesus Still Breathes... [Scott Kinder-Pyle]

Psalm 111

John 20:19—31

So I asked an Artificial Intelligence Chatbot why it was necessary to breathe, and you might be surprised to hear that the Chatbot responded by using the plural pronoun ‘*WE*.’ It said:

“We breathe to supply our cells with oxygen, which is essential for producing energy, and to remove carbon dioxide, a toxic waste product created by this energy production. This continuous exchange, regulated by the brain and muscles like the diaphragm, allows the body to function, keep tissues healthy and maintain life.”

And in reply to this erudite answer, I hope you join me in saying, ‘Thank you very much, Mr.

Artificial Intelligence. Those of us who truly inhale and exhale the air around us appreciate how seriously you’ve taken the question—so much so that you have included yourself in the process.’

‘*WE*,’ I’d like to suggest, can be a loaded word, a pressurized word—and it’s a dubious word in that while you and I may enjoy that feeling of belonging that comes with being a ‘*WE*’—there’s also the chance that each of us, made in the image of God, is being subsumed.

Consider what’s expressed in John’s Gospel: after the Resurrected Jesus breathes upon *some*, but not all, of the disciples, Thomas is not included in the ‘*WE*.’ He wasn’t there. Verse 19 had described those who were present as locked in a room “for fear of the Jews”—which is interesting, considering the fact that they themselves are Jewish. But then, after seeing Jesus circumvent the walls—after hearing Jesus say, “*Peace be with you*”—after feeling the breath of Jesus on their skin—in verse 25, those who’ve had that tremendous experience say the following to Thomas, who didn’t have the experience: “*WE have seen the Lord.*” And, what’s important for me to proclaim this morning, over two thousand years later, is—the story doesn’t end there.

During the height of the Covid-19 epidemic, I was working as a chaplain at *Providence Sacred Heart Hospital*. And during one of my days of breathing through the mandated N-95 mask, I met two adult children, a brother and a sister, who wanted to say goodbye to their mother. A few days earlier, I learned, their father had died; and now their mother was also breathing her last. And it was terribly awkward because, in order to be at her bedside, each of us had to don what looked like an astronaut suit. And the noise of the respirators and other machinery in the room seemed very loud. And when I prayed I wasn't sure if anyone could hear me. And then going outside we had to very carefully doff every article of protective clothing in a certain order... And after all that, while standing outside the Intensive Care Unit, I heard the son say that his parents didn't believe in... and my sense was that he was going to say 'God.' But he didn't. What he said was—'My parents didn't believe in the Covid-19 virus; they thought it was a hoax.' And the daughter said, "WE did too. WE thought it was hoax. But NOW I DON'T.

NOW, of course, is relative. One person's crucial moment in the sun is not always the other person's. And more often than not, *NOW* slips away with the next involuntary, unconscious breath. But what if the Resurrected Jesus still breathes for the sake of that moment of *NOW* that's coming to you and to me. In other words, he breathes, not because he needs the oxygen, but because (for example) on that evening of the first day of the week—*NOW* was the opportunity for at least some of the disciples to believe that death had been overcome... And, you see, that moment for Thomas wouldn't come until the following Sunday. Either way, for us *NOW* is the precise moment when there is a tingling in the spine, when a gaggle of goosebumps land on the skin of upper arms. It's the moment when Jesus says, "***Peace be with you.***"

Too often, I would say, people in churches read today's passage and assume it's about shaming the one disciple in the group who expresses his skepticism and who gives voice to his doubts. And yet, Jesus has not shamed Thomas at all. And if you're here this morning, feeling like you don't quite belong because you don't believe as fervently as others seem to, there may be a moment coming your way. (Don't be ashamed to wait for it or to wonder about it). And while waiting, consider how Thomas was being prepared for *his* moment. In John 11:16, when Jesus is making the decision to join Mary and Martha and to mourn the death of Lazarus, who is going to be resuscitated after four days of moldering in the grave, it's Thomas who says, ***"Let us go and die with him."*** Then in John 14:5, as Jesus is about to identify himself as ***"the Way, the Truth and the Life,"*** it's Thomas who is bold enough to interrupt: ***"Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"*** And my point is that such remarks are evidence of a faith that's growing in the soil of some serious and honest questions; and it's a faith that's willing to NOT belong to the all-encompassing *WE*... ***"Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side..."***

One of my teachers, James Loder, told the story of a woman with whom he was doing some psychotherapy; and the woman, as a young girl, had been sexually abused by her stepfather. Those images tormented her especially because, after he had violated her, he portrayed himself as a devout Christian who prayed to God and sang in the choir. She didn't want to belong to a group like that. But as the woman acknowledged some of these wounds before God, she became aware of her breath; and it seemed as if someone else was breathing for her, with her, above and beneath her. Could it be the Risen and Wounded Jesus still breathing?

I was telling you earlier how I resent the technology that has never hyperventilated—that has never experienced asphyxia—that has never held its breath under water because it has no breath and no need to breathe—arranging its little algorithms to tell me why it’s necessary to fill my lungs with air and let CO2 go. But what I also struggle with is the *carte-blanche*, blanket-belief in Jesus that doesn’t *breathe* at all. In other words, to announce the EXTRAORDINARY Resurrection of Jesus as if it were just another ordinary fact—and then to shame those around us for not getting on-board with the facts—is tantamount to idolatry. It’s like worshipping your own belief or your own need to belong. And in Psalm 115, beginning at verse five, the problem with idolatry is laid out for us:

*They have mouths, but they do not speak;
they have eyes, but they do not see.
They have ears, but they do not hear;
they have noses, but they do not smell.
They have hands, but they do not feel;
they have feet, but they do not walk;
they make no sound in their throats.
Those who make them are like them;
so are all who trust in them.*

Now, contrast this dynamic with the Resurrected Jesus—who comes speaking ‘Peace’ to us with a mouth, who hears our doubts with his ears, who with pierced hands and feet reaches for us, and who, as he breathes, makes a sound in his throat. Jesus shows up with the ultimate expertise in why breathing is necessary. According to Mark 15:37; Matthew 27:50; Luke 23:46 he knows what it’s like to *breathe his last*. John 19:30 puts it more poetically, saying, he **“gave up his spirit.”** And so, if you’re like me, searching for a reliable expert on breathing, I prefer someone who doesn’t just breathe for his own oxygen, but who breathes in mixed company—WITH his wounds exposed, and FOR those moments when one individual may ‘come to believe.’

Come To Believe. After all is said and done with Thomas, Jesus says, **“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”** Later in verse 31, the gospel writer says, these many signs and words of Jesus **“are written so that you may come to believe.”** So, what is it to COME to believe?

Douglas Coupland is the author of a book entitled, *Life After God*, in which he describes his doubts, which largely consist of people always telling him he *has to* believe. And so, in one of the chapters, he’s driving through this desolate part of Nevada with only Christian Radio to listen to, and this is what he writes:

“The radio stations all seemed to be talking about Jesus nonstop, and it seemed to be this crazy orgy of projection, with everyone projecting onto Jesus the antidotes to the things that had gone wrong in their own lives. He is Love. He is Forgiveness. He is Compassion. He is a Wise Career Decision. He is a Child Who Loves Me... I was feeling a sense of loss as I heard these people... I did not deny that the existence of Jesus was real to these people — it was merely that I was cut off from their experience in a way that was never connectable. And yet, I had to ask myself over and over what it was these radio people were seeing in the face of Jesus...”

You see, it’s this last part that’s crucial: ‘I had to ask myself over and over...’

Some of you, I’m sure, want to see this congregation thrive as a group of believers who say, **“WE have seen the Lord.”** And maybe you presume WE already are that group—and that’s the end of the story. But the alternative might be a community who breathes right alongside those who say, ‘I have to ask myself...’ and who may ‘come to believe...’ **“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”** Imagine that: we’re not blessed by compelling everyone to believe—full stop—end of sentence—but we’re blessed as we make room for those who may ‘come to believe.’

Another question, more frequently asked of the *Google* Chatbot, goes like so: *What percentage of atoms in our bodies were once part of the dinosaurs' living corpus?* And you may be surprised to know that, according to the artificial intelligence, the answer is “given that all atoms are recycled through various biological and geological processes over millions of years... a common estimate suggests that roughly 0.1 percent to 1 percent of the atoms in our bodies could have once been part of dinosaurs.” And I don't know about you, but I'm impressed. I'm impressed by the possibility that my body's material may have, at one time, belonged to the sharp horns of a Triceratops or to the massive jaws of a Tyrannosaurus Rex.

On the other hand—when I take the time to breathe—I mean, really breathe—what's more impressive is the verse that Jesus probably read and re-read over and over (from Genesis 2:7):
“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.”

RUAH in Hebrew. ***RUAH***. It means breath or wind or spirit.

PNEUMA in the Greek. ***PNEUMA***. It's possible that Jesus used these very words when he breathed on the disciples and it's likely that same air's around here somewhere.

“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit.”