

"Air...breath...Spirit"

Based on John 20:19-31

April 18, 2004

Our Savior's Lutheran Church

Siri C. Dale

In 11th grade chemistry class I learned to see the world through different eyes, or rather, I began to understand that my eyes alone couldn't give me all of the information I needed to know about how the world works. I remember it distinctly...yes, the old Candle in a Vacuum demonstration.

My energetic chemistry teacher lit a small candle, placed it inside of a glass container that was hooked up to a vacuum pump, and instructed us to keep our eyes fixed on the flame. In the beginning, the flame burned brightly as the yellow part of the candle flame pointed straight up. Then, he turned on the vacuum pump, a simple device that pumped air out of the glass container.

We couldn't see the air leaving the container, of course, but as the candle's flame started to dim, it was clear that something inside that container had changed. Finally, after most of the air had been pumped out of the container, the flame died out to almost nothing.

The inside of the container looked the same before and after the pump did its work. Our eyes could not really detect the difference between the presence of air and the absence of it in the container. We didn't see the air leaving the container. We only observed the changes in the size and color of the candle's flame. On the molecular level, both situations were invisible to our eyes.

It wasn't until the second half of the 18th century that scientists figured out what was happening in this experiment...it was then that they discovered oxygen, a gaseous molecule that is necessary for the candle's flame to burn brightly. When air is pumped out of the glass container, the flame no longer has what it needs to burn.

Something about this simple experiment excited my curiosity about the world and about those things which we cannot see...things like oxygen molecules. Suddenly air was no longer an invisible nothingness, empty space, or dead stuff that fills our atmosphere, our skies, and our lungs.

I realized how essential air is to life...how I depend on those invisible oxygen molecules for my very life...just as the candle did for its flame. I saw myself in relationship with the air in a new way...those oxygen molecules from the air become a part of my body, a part of my bloodstream and are constantly traveling throughout my body.

Today, as we celebrate Earth Day, I am mindful once again of my gratitude for air and its life-sustaining qualities. But I am also deeply aware that the quality of the air we breathe is deteriorating as our polluting ways continue to increase. The skies are becoming smoggier and are filled with molecules our bodies would rather not take in.

The state of our air, locally and globally, has been at the forefront of environmental concerns for decades. We are all familiar with concepts such as ozone-layer depletion, acid rain, smog, air pollution, and global climate change.

I don't know a single person who believes that any of these things are good for the health of the planet or for the life on it. You don't see too many people out lobbying for more pollution, who long for smoggier days, or who march around the state capitol with large signs that say "Bring on the Acid Rain" or "Warmer temperatures for all"...though that may be a true desire for Minnesotans during the middle of winter.

I think it's safe to assume that we are all FOR clean air and that we desire it for all people and all species everywhere. Disagreements start to arise when we begin to discuss how we are going to clean up the air and slow the human-impact on global climate change.

Now, some of you may be thinking, why are we talking about this in church, anyway? Let's leave it to the scientists and the engineers and the politicians to figure out how to solve these problems for us. That's their job...and what does all of this have to do with Jesus' resurrection appearance to his disciples in the Gospel of John?

This morning's text is a familiar one. We can all probably retell Thomas' encounter with the risen Jesus...his doubt...his touching of Jesus' hands and side...and his confession of belief. So, I'm not going to talk about Thomas this morning. Instead, I want to direct our attention to the first part of this gospel story...the part that takes place on Easter evening.

Earlier that morning, the Apostle Mary Magdalene had encountered the risen Jesus, and he had commissioned her to go and tell the good news to the others. In the evening of that same day, Jesus appeared to his disciples who had locked themselves into a house because they were afraid they might die a death like his.

We've become so conditioned to skip this part of the story and go right on to doubting Thomas that we miss one of the most important events in this whole gospel...the birth of the new community...the beginning of the church.

After greeting his disciples for the first time in his resurrected state, the disciples rejoiced, and they were filled with peace and joy. Then, Jesus said, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." He commissioned them to continue his work of love and compassion, healing and forgiveness, and to go and tell this good news to the world.

Then, John tells us that Jesus breathed on them. On Easter evening, Jesus breathed on his disciples...not a sigh, not an accentuated exhale, not a magic trick...but he breathed on them. Instead of nodding our heads and saying, "Hey, that's cool," we should pause and ask ourselves what Jesus was really doing there. Why did he breathe on them? What was the author of this gospel trying to tell us by saying that Jesus breathed on his disciples? This only makes sense if we jump back into a pre-scientific mindset...if we allow ourselves to travel back through the centuries to a time when they didn't know about the molecular composition of air. In the Bible, breath is a word, an image, a metaphor that is used to speak of God's acts of creation.

In Genesis 2, God breathed the breath of life into the nostrils of the first human. God infused this dusty earth creature with life by infusing it with the breath of God, and the

creature became a living being. God's breath is a metaphor for the life-giving power of God's presence. Just as we depend upon the oxygen in the air to live, so, too, we depend upon God for our life.

We encounter a similar image in the book of Ezekiel, when God breathes life into the dry bones and creates new life in the midst of death. The dry bones cannot come to life without the breath of God living within them.

So, in the Gospel of John, Jesus' act of breathing on his disciples was an act of creation...he was giving them new life. John tells us that Jesus breathed on his disciples in order to show that the resurrected Jesus took this group of people who were so afraid of the world that they had locked themselves inside a house and transformed them into a new community. He gave them a special mission to go and tell the good news to the world...to leave their safe hiding place and proclaim the resurrection to all who would listen.

While breathing on them, Jesus said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." To create this new community, Jesus bestowed upon them the Spirit of God. In his departure from earthly life, he assured them that God's Spirit would be with them always ...comforting, challenging and guiding them as they continued to do God's work in the world.

That Spirit, that breath of God that Jesus gave to his disciples on Easter night, is the same Spirit that is present among us today. The Holy Spirit is not some invisible ghost that moves randomly about the planet...here one minute, poof, gone the next. The Holy Spirit doesn't play favorites, available to a select few only.

The Holy Spirit is God's promised presence to all of creation at all times. God's Spirit is like the air. It is everywhere...present to all throughout God's creation. God's Spirit is like breath. We need God just as we need to breathe in order to exist as creatures in this world.

God's Spirit is present in the whole creation, in the air we breathe, in the wind we feel blowing against us, in the blue skies we admire, and in the atmosphere that protects life on Earth from the harshness of the sun's rays.

On this Earth Day, we would do well to recover this more integrated understanding of air...breath...and...Spirit. In ancient Hebrew, the word for breath of God, wind, and Spirit was the same word. The ancient Hebrews didn't separate moving air from breath from God's Spirit. The three were so closely interconnected that they only needed one word to describe all of them.

Just as the Candle in a Vacuum experiment helped me to see the world with new eyes, so my Christian belief in the Spirit of God changes the way I view the Earth and God's relationship to it. The air is not some dead and distant substance that we can pollute and alter at will. It is sacred, and our actions should reflect such a conviction as much as possible.

The Spirit of God continues to be among us, creating new life and calling us to new forms of community. It is my belief that today the Spirit is calling Christians to be leaders in the restoration of Earth's well-being. Christians have a central role to play in cleaning up our air, preventing further damage to the ozone layer, and making forward-thinking energy choices to address the problem of climate change.

If all Christians switched over to wind and solar energy and drove only the most fuel efficient vehicles...if all Christians lobbied for efficient and low-polluting forms of public transportation...if all Christians called for our country to provide leadership that seriously addresses the challenge of global climate change, think what a difference we could make together for the well-being of God's creation.

As Jesus revealed to his disciples on Easter evening, the good news of the resurrection is not just about personal salvation or life after death. The good news of the resurrection is that God's Spirit is ever-present, working to create new life in the midst of death, calling forth a community of people that will endeavor to continue Jesus' work in the world, and guiding us with new visions of our relationship and responsibility to the rest of God's creation. Amen.