

Breathing Through These Days
II Corinthians 3:1-4, 12-18 and John 14: 1-5a, 15-17, 25-27
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Last summer for my birthday I received a face mask designed for exercise. I am a runner and my regular route through the neighborhood puts me in more crowded spaces. And so I asked for, and received, this mask that fits securely over my nose, cradles for my chin, resists water and also continues the necessary barrier between my breath and the breath of those around me. If there a more potent symbol of 2020 than a face mask? You wear them. You have sewn them. We have the fruits of your labor here at Grace, to share with those come in need of one. Face masks symbolize the air-borne characteristic of COVID and the way the virus lodges itself in the lungs. Face masks also impact, I observed, the way I interact with others. They have altered what I notice about my own living, breathing, and being.

The first thing I observed about running in a face mask was how attentive the mask made me to my breath. Exercising in a mask made me conscious of every time I inhaled air and then exhaled it. With my breath contained behind the cloth, I could truly hear myself breathing.

Attending to your breath is a posture of prayer. The creation story of Genesis tells of God's Spirit, or breath, moving across the chaos and forming light, separating day and night, land and sea and then, after fashioning humankind from the clay of the earth, breathing upon those lifeless figures so that we, creatures of the earth, are animated by God's breath. To quiet ourselves in moments of prayer by listening to our breath is to remember that God breathed life into us and that we are sustained in the cosmos by God's breathing Spirit. Experts tell us that whenever one gets anxious – or faces a dangerous situation – a strategy for survival is to consciously slow down your breathing. So to notice your breath – the inhale and exhale happening behind a mask – is to acknowledge our vulnerability to a disease that solidifies the lungs while simultaneously receiving the reassurance that God's Spirit breathes alongside us.

Now, to breathe under a face mask, especially when exerting oneself, can get uncomfortable. Your breath gets hot, so then your skin starts to sweat. Perhaps your glasses get foggy and you can't see your way forward. The mask, designed for protection, starts to feel like a burdensome barrier. The impulse is to rip it off and let yourself gulp down cooler air. At some point in my run, I inevitably think "Get me free of this mask!" I equate that impulse to pull down the mask with a longing to be released from this enduring quarantine. We want for restrictions in gathering size to be lifted or closures to be set aside. Let the sports stadiums open! Let us have dinner parties! It is hard to live so many months without the freedom to be with one another. Knowing the need for health, safety and mutual care, we will live with the constraints, but we would rather be free.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul tells them "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." There is freedom. This isn't a freedom of life unfettered from its obligations or responsibilities. It is the freedom wrought by the Spirit of God breathing alongside us, so that

each time we take another hot, sweaty, weary, grieving breath we also inhale other truths. We breathe in the love with which we were created. We breathe in trust, that God does not forsake us. We breathe in boldness, that our lives might be letters of God's faithfulness, for with each act of kindness or courage we create an ink-stain of God's presence to another.

In the final days of his life, Jesus spoke what is known as the Farewell Discourse to his disciples, contained in John's gospel, which Kitty read to us this morning. His first words to them were: "Do not let your hearts be troubled." Now this passage is often read at funerals and the command can sound like words of comfort amid grief. It can appear Jesus, as he faces his death, is telling his friends, "Don't be sad." Actually, the word "troubled" is used more often in this gospel in places where Jesus is disturbed by the power of death and evil.¹ "Troubled" represents that agitation when forces for ill seem to be prevailing. Facing his crucifixion Jesus says, be strong, be confident even as you walk through days in which everything you have worked for appears to be defeated, everything you have hoped for appears to be disappearing. You can be confident rather than troubled, courageous rather than timid because the Spirit is always freely working. The Spirit is not contained by our limitations, unleashing itself upon the world, working in and through us, and despite of us, to ensure loving breath that powers the cosmos still is inhaling and exhaling.

There is a particular point in my running route where I am headed up a very long hill. I traverse a gradual upward slope, a tiny plateau and then a smaller but still sizable final ascent. Invariably somewhere along that stretch my breath becomes very winded. I start gulping for air. Since the pandemic began, as my breath becomes more ragged, my thoughts have drifted to Jesus's ragged breath upon the cross.

The first time the thought occurred to me, I pushed it aside as melodramatic. The second time the image came, I did the same thing. But when it happened again, I wondered if the Spirit was trying to get my attention. There is no equivalence between my breath while exercising and Jesus's upon the cross. But the culmination of these months – the death count, the anxiety, the accompanying worries of housing or hunger, the indiscriminate nature of a virus, and unequal and unjust suffering it has prompted across the globe – might need and require our prayerful, breathing presence at the foot of Jesus's cross. Crucifixion is a death by asphyxiation, where one's body gives out, exhausted from being slowly deprived of oxygen. There has been so much suffering in these months. So many who have been deprived of oxygen. What better place to think of Jesus that while listening to one's own breath, contained behind a mask, and realize his utter solidarity with our grieving, hurting, troubled world.

Further along his Farewell discourse Jesus also says "In my Father's house there are many rooms." He promises his followers that he is going there to make a place for them. It is easy to hear his words and think of a room for each of us in God's heaven. But in John's gospel locations are used as symbols for relationships.² Jesus is saying "In the wide space that is my

¹ O'Day, Gail R. "The Gospel of John" in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 740.

² Ibid.

relationship with God, there is room for you.” In my crucified breathes, I am creating spaces for all to find your place alongside God.

What makes my running mask work is its design, which has created extra space in the front between nose and chin. It’s not a large space. In fact, the space must be small in order for the face mask to do its protective work. But it is enough space to take those larger breaths required for exercise. In a paradoxical way, the labored breaths of Jesus’ crucifixion enabled a new world to be born, a world resurrected by God’s love, a world born breath by breath.

Jesus, cried Thomas, when hearing these words of not being troubled and a room being prepared, how will we know the way to you? We can’t see the path forward. We don’t really understand what you are talking about. We don’t have your courage, nor your abiding connection to God. The Spirit will guide you, replied Jesus, breath by breath.

When my kids were little one of my favorite things to do was to listen to them breathe. I would sneak into their rooms late at night and put my hand on their back and take in their inhale, exhale. As infants when they caught a cold, their noses would get snuffy and I would hold them upright on my chest to help them breathe more easily. Then I could hear their tiny breath right in my ear. God, who is a Father and Mother to us all, holds us and listens our breath, inviting us to listen to God’s breath, to find the peace that is contained within God’s inhale and exhale. Breath by breath. Amen.