

Holy Temples

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher in the Lenten series
“Listen: Hearing that Still, Small Voice and Finding Your Own”
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Gospel of John 20:19-22 (Good News Translation): ¹⁹ It was late that Sunday evening, and the disciples were gathered together behind locked doors, because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities. Then Jesus came and stood among them. “Peace be with you,” he said. ²⁰ After saying this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples were filled with joy at seeing the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I send you.” ²² Then he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”
- Psalms 150:6 (New Revised Standard Version): Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Becoming aware of our breathing is a way we can use our bodies to help us listen for the spirit of God seeking to work in us.

Last week we kicked off our journey through Lent, a journey to become better prepared to listen for God, to listen for what the Bible calls that “still, small voice.” A while back my mother sent me a magazine clipping that noted that the words “silent” and “listen” have the same letters. That certainly ties in to what I talked about last week, when we focused on trying to create opportunities for silence in order to clear away the chaos and clutter so we might listen for God.

Today, to consider another way we can listen for God’s “still, small voice,” we’re going to look at... our bodies.

Yikes! Even *thinking* about our bodies makes just about everyone uncomfortable. Now I’m going to *talk* about our physical bodies? Many people are quite self-conscious about what their body looks like or how well it functions. Some wish that what is curvy were flatter, or what is flat would be more curvy. Some wish they were taller, others shorter, some heavier, others lighter, some wish for more stamina, others for more sleep, and on and on. Our bodies give us joy and grief, satisfaction and frustration.

But before all this “body talk” gets us too worked up, remember: bodies are God’s idea. Our bodies are God’s way of creating a sense of place for our spirit.

And within this “holder for our spirit” – within our bodies--our spirit is most clearly experienced by our breath. Here’s what I mean: in the story of God creating humankind in Genesis Chapter 2 we’re told “Then the Lord God took some soil from the ground and formed a man out of it; [God] breathed life-giving breath into his nostrils and the man began to live.”¹

Let me make two linguistic points. First, in Hebrew the words for “earth” and “man” are very similar, so until God breathed the breath of life into him, the man was literally just a lump of clay. Second, in the New Testament the same Greek word is used to mean both breath and spirit. So the point of the Genesis story is that the figure was inanimate, it was nothing, until God breathed life-giving breath into it, until God placed a living spirit within it.

And conversely, over and over the Bible says that it’s the *departure* of breath that brings an end to life. In Genesis we read:

¹ Genesis 2:7 Good News Translation

- “Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age...”²
- “...Isaac breathed his last; he died and was gathered to his people;³
- “When Jacob ended his [instructions] to his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed, [and] breathed his last....”⁴
- And in the book of 1 Kings, Elijah encountered a boy whose “illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him;”⁵

Breath is a sign that a God-given animated spirit is present. That’s what we heard in this morning’s reading from John’s gospel. On that first Easter night, when the disciples gathered behind locked doors out of fear, the Risen Christ suddenly appeared in their midst. He recommissioned them, telling them that as the Heavenly Father had sent him into the world, Jesus was sending them into the world. Remember how he empowered them? John wrote, “Then he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”⁶ Breath was a living spirit. The Holy Spirit was the breath of life.

So it follows that being more mindful of our breath is a way to become more aware of God’s spirit living within us and seeking to work in the world through us. Mindful breathing could be another avenue for listening for God’s still, small voice.

Many years ago I was part of an eclectic group taking an eight-week class guided by a life coach who helped each of us work on personal goals. I was working on overcoming procrastination... and someday I’ll get around to finishing the homework for that course! There was a fellow in the group—probably around age 70—whose goal was to breathe better. I remember thinking, “What? *Breathing*? You are breathing! Unless you have a medical condition, what could you possibly do to be a ‘better breather’?”

Since then, I’ve learned a little bit more about this thing that each of us does about 26,000 times a day.⁷ “At standard room temperature and pressure, you’re breathing in roughly 25 sextillion molecules every time you take a breath. That’s 25 with 21 zeroes behind it....”⁸ Retired theoretical physicist Lawrence Krauss used to teach at Case Western Reserve University. Professor Krauss supports the theory that the molecules we breathe are redistributed evenly in our atmosphere within a number of centuries.... And if that’s the case, he argues for a mathematical probability that more than 99 out of 100 of our breaths will contain molecules [breathed by Caesar or Cleopatra or even Jesus].⁹

Fortunately, we rarely think about our breathing, but for a moment, let’s do that. Most of the time most of us breathe through the mouth shallowly, using just the top part of our lungs, and that shallow breathing leads to our ribs becoming more rigid than they’re intended to be. But if we learn to breathe through our nose and breathe more deeply using our abdominal muscles and diaphragm,

² Genesis 25:8 New Revised Standard Version

³ Genesis 35:29 New Revised Standard Version

⁴ Genesis 49:33 New Revised Standard Version

⁵ 1 Kings 17:17 New Revised Standard Version

⁶ John 20:22 Good News Translation

⁷ John Douillard, *Body, Mind and Sport: The mind-body guide to lifelong health, fitness, and your personal best (Revised Edition)*. New York: Three Rivers Press: 2001, 160.

⁸ Simon Worrall, “The Air You Breathe Is Full of Surprises,” National Geographic at <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2017/08/air-gas-caesar-last-breath-sam-kean/> accessed 3/22/2019

⁹ Kate Kershner, “5 Earth Facts to Blow Your Kid’s Mind,” HowStuffWorks, at <https://science.howstuffworks.com/environmental/conservation/conservationists/5-earth-facts-for-kids4.htm> accessed 3/22/2019

our ribs and spine remain more flexible. Who knew that breathing could help your back! What's more, slower, deeper breathing through the nose rather than the mouth has a calming effect. "As you focus on your breath your thoughts settle down and your mind becomes calm and clear."¹⁰

At some point in his career, actor Yul Brenner realized that. To calm himself down before going on stage he would be seen leaning against a backstage wall, engaging in some slow, deep breathing through the nose.¹¹ Perhaps your doctor has asked you to take some deep breaths before checking your blood pressure. Maybe you've found yourself taking a few deep breaths before you have to have a difficult conversation.

I'm not trying to go "all mystical" on you, suggesting that you adopt the meditation practices of a Buddhist monk or a Hindu swami. But a simple practice of learning to focus on your breathing occasionally can be a tool, a practice that helps you calm your body and calm your mind.

- You don't need to call attention to yourself – you can do it subtly and quietly, with your eyes open or closed.
- You can do it wherever you are – in the car, in the shower, in the TSA line at the airport, in your church pew.
- You don't need special clothing or equipment.
- You can do it for five seconds or five minutes or however long you choose.

And when you do that – when you focus on God's spirit flowing through you with every deep breath you draw in and let out – you clear away some of the clutter of thoughts and the flurry of activity. You create a space of calm and peace where you can be more attuned to listening for God's "still, small voice:"

- You might discern God speaking encouragement to help you face the challenge looming before you.
- You might sense God offering you comfort in your time of sorrow, hope to lift you out of your place of discouragement.
- You might hear whispers of godly guidance as you try to discern your next steps.

Focusing on God's spirit bringing life to you in every breath, you'll see why St. Paul called our bodies not just a home but a "temple of the Holy Spirit."¹² Instead of fighting the appearance and function and limitations of your physical body, your God-given body can help you listen for the working of God's spirit, God's living breath, within you. Whenever you think of the psalmist's call to every being in heaven and earth – the call to "Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!" – you'll be part of that chorus of praise to God!

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¹⁰ EOC Institute, <https://eocinstitute.org/meditation/meditation-and-breathing-benefits-of-mindful-breathing/> accessed 3/22/2019

¹¹ John Douillard, *Body, Mind and Sport: The mind-body guide to lifelong health, fitness, and your personal best (Revised Edition)*. New York: Three Rivers Press: 2001, 158.

¹² 1 Corinthians 6:19 Good News Translation