

Breathe Deeply

A Message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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by Rev. Dave Le Grand

How many of you, at home and in sanctuary here, have seen this stained glass (or a variation of it) in a church somewhere? It is entitled *The Light of the World* (1851–1853) and was painted in the mid-1800's by artist William Holman Hunt. Here, Jesus is preparing to knock on the door in an overgrown garden. It alludes to a quote from Revelation:

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice, and opens the door, I will come in to them, and will sup with them, and they with me".¹

There is something particularly interesting about the door – if you look carefully, you will see that the door has no handle. It can only be opened only from the inside.² Take a few seconds to look at this art work. Imagine yourself somewhere in this scene – perhaps an onlooker from the garden, or, perhaps, you feel more like the person on the other side of the door, locked to Jesus.

Every time we worship here, I begin by grounding myself, you joining me, grounding ourselves, in our breathing. We notice the sensation of air inflating our lungs. Breathing. It is a simple, unconscious function. In fact, we can breathe in about 22,000 times a day.³ It has become common to do breathwork – that is, the slowing down and deepening of our breathing to relax.

Let us try – to breathe in slowly. Then out.

The first sign I get from my body that I'm stressed is that my breathing becomes more shallow. But practitioners of yoga, grounded in Hindu teaching, know that the foundation of spiritual health is breathing. Well, actually, our Bible stories also tell us that our creation is grounded in breath. In the Genesis Creation story, God's spirit hovers, before earth, water, or creatures come to be, there is *ruach*, the Hebrew word for Spirit, which also can mean "wind." The counterpart in Greek in the Christian Scriptures is *Pneuma*. When Jesus talks about the Spirit, the word for Spirit also means breath, wind.

Remember Jesus appearing to disciples in the locked room after Jesus was crucified. They were scared. You might recall Jesus doing notable things: He "breathed" on them, and, he blessed them by saying, "Peace." He did this twice.

In fact, in the Gospel of John, Jesus has not used the word "peace" at all until he says it here in the passage we hear today.⁴ Never mentioned the word "Peace" – the Greek word, *eirēnē*. But then he uses it several times in succession. First, on the eve of his arrest and crucifixion he says, "Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."

¹ Revelation 3:20 New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVUE) Copyright © 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

² More details about this art found on Wikipedia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Light_of_the_World_\(painting\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Light_of_the_World_(painting))

³ From Canadian Lung Association <https://www.lung.ca/lung-health/>

⁴ Commentary by Mary Hinkle Shore Working Preacher May 9, 2010.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-john-1423-29-2>

Jesus continues, "My peace I give to. Not as the world gives do I give to you."

In the Gospel of John, after his crucifixion, Jesus brings good news to his terrified friends, doors locked – he says "Peace." He doesn't elaborate on what peace means, but we can imagine how it feels from the story.

That experience of fear and anxiety; we know that experience far too intimately these days. Two years of lockdown, COVID updates by the hour. We are far from at our best, spiritually, in times like this. We miss those intimate conversations, face-to-face, feeling the care of someone near and dear. Our nerves become frayed, our tempers short.

Do any of these symptoms of modern living resonate for you?

Asking for help has never been easy for me. Being a man, my culture probably taught me to be stoic, tough. Opening that spiritual door does not occur to some of us. Perhaps there are a few other members of "I-Don't-Need-Help Anonymous" among us today!

When I began ministry, at least being paid to do ministry, twenty-six years ago, things were not going well. No, it was a disaster. I was sinking into full depression, hiding in the large manse, alone. I remember my parents, God bless them, calling me several times a day, pleading with me to get out. I was going to stay because the United Church rules stated that a new minister needs to stay at least three years at that time. It was not a hard and fast rule, but I imposed it on myself. Stoic, right?

The persistent rings on the phone, that spiritual knock of Jesus out in the unkept garden.

You've perhaps heard this parable: A storm descends on a small town. The downpour soon turns into a flood. As the waters rise, the man prays, surrounded by water. Along comes one of the townspeople in a canoe.

"Come on, friend, get in. The waters are rising fast."

"No," says the man. "I have faith in God, I will be saved."

The waters continue to rise. Now the man is upstairs in the house, on the balcony, wringing his hands in and praying more desperately.

A woman this time zips up in a motorboat. "Come on, buddy. We need to get you out of here. The levee's gonna break any minute."

Once again, the man will not budge. "I shall remain. God will see me through."

Well, the levee breaks, and the flood rushes over house and there is nothing left but the top of the roof. The man is clinging at its peak, when a helicopter descends out of the clouds.

A Coast Guard officer calls down to him through a speaker. "Grab the ladder, Sir. This is your last chance."

Once again, the guy insists that God will deliver him. He drowns.

The guy goes to heaven, and gets an interview with God. He asks the Source of Life, "Creator, I had unwavering faith in you. Why didn't you deliver me from that flood?"

God's head shakes for minute. "What did you want from me? I sent you two boats and a helicopter."

Peace. Let us all take time to breathe in God's goodness. Amen.