

**May 3, 2020**

Genesis 1:20–25, 30–31

John 20: 19–23

*Air-born*

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Today, again, is the Eighth Day: the first day of a new week, the day after the Sabbath day that crowned the work of Creation with rest – the day that opened up a space for human beings to pay attention to the intricate marvel of it all, and to gather strength for the work that always lies ahead as a new week begins.

Sometimes we call this first day of the week the Lord’s Day – though perhaps Jesus would call it *our* day, the day *for us*, because it was, as the Gospel of John says, the day he gave the greatest gift he had to give, which was peace. He said it twice – and, in the giving, didn’t just call his gift by the noun of its name, “Peace,” but summoned it and conferred it with an imperative, twice: Peace be with you. He gave it to them, says John, by breathing on them – and there’s no mistaking that remarkable gesture for anything but a reprise of the first chapter of Genesis, when God breathed into the earthling He had created out of earth, and brought him, her, them, us, alive. Sometimes we call this first day of the week the Lord’s Day; but it’s our birthday, the day Jesus passed his breath along to us, and the story of Creation started all over again.

Oh, and how achingly we crave the intimacy of that gesture now! No social distance in his showing of the wounded hands and side; nothing masked or hedged or held back about the way he chose to speak to their fear, to soothe the whiplash of their grief at his gruesome death turned to astonishment at his unstoppable life. Peace was, of all things, what they needed. And whatever the physics of resurrection may be, clearly nothing physical about the way bodies work, before or after death, impeded the giving of that gift. The doors were locked, the house shuttered for fear of everything going on outside. But he was there anyway, and breathed out peace, conferred peace then just as he does now – will do tonight, even, if you are alone and shuttered and fearful and disoriented. *Peace be with you*, he will say again on this first night of the week, if you listen – and then, as a sign that you’ve received it, you might notice that your lungs are breathing not because of anything you did – the sure sign that there is no social distance between you and him at all, or any spiritual distance either. It’s the eighth day and, with your lungs full of his breath, the story begins again – a new creation.

Nobody knows who wrote that story of earth’s beginning that has come down to us as the first chapter of Genesis. Some audacious, mystical poet-paleontologist, maybe, reading backwards through the layered wonders of Creation. How do you write a story like that? How do you look through the almost-infinitely faceted lens of this intricate, ingenious world and see back to how it all might have coalesced in the first place, how the patterns might have been laid down, how the luminous web was spun thread by thread?

As we look back through the lens of Genesis, this Eastertide, this week we’re at the point, somewhere between Day 5 and Day 6, where the storyteller notices something among the layers of life, something that, actually, *all* the living creatures have in common: every living creature, “all the beasts of the earth and all the fowl of the

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heavens and all that crawls on the earth,” all have within them “the breath of life”. At what point do you notice the simple, stunning, indispensable fact that *everything is breathing*? At what point does it dawn on you that the most primordial miracle of existence is the one you can’t see, the one that fills every corner of every space without even trying? At what point do you awaken to the wonder of air?

If you think back to winter, you might remember noticing it: the sting of the freezing air as you drew it into yourself, when the shock of cold could make you wonder about the ability of lungs to crack the fierce grip of temperature. How is it that so gentle a thing as a breath can split the air open and drink the little molecules that life requires into our blood and marrow? But then there it was, when you breathed out: proof positive in the print of your own lungs against the day, a cloud of the vapor of your respiration like a little flag that said back to the freezing winter, just for a moment, *there is life going on here...* And then it vanished, and you had to breathe again, endure the prickle in your nostrils and the piercing cold in your chest again in order to keep your defiant little testimony of life to the freezing winter going.

Now it’s spring, of course, when the air comes in easier. These days, in my neighborhood, there are dozens more people than usual out strolling, in almost any weather. Spring always stirs our blood - but I’m sure this year something else is going on. All this walking bespeaks a kind of appetite for interaction, a hunger to escape the confines of self and exchange nutrients with the world, even across whatever distances we’re stuck with. In the world we live in right now, respiration is an act of defiance. Just the act of breathing is revealed for the triumph that it is and always has been. And we can see, for once, what’s usually invisible: the miracle of air.

Recently I found a timely theological reflection about air in an unexpected place: Michael Pollan’s book *Cooked: a Natural History of Transformation*. Michael Pollan is a prophetic journalist who sometimes waxes downright lyrical as he writes about our relationship with food and the earth that produces it<sup>1</sup> – and I confess to being a bit of a foodie, so I find reading him delicious.

In *Cooked* he gets you thinking about the lengths human beings go to transform unappetizing or barely edible things (grass, animal flesh, rot) into pleasurable nourishment. My first favorite thing about the book is the four sections into which Pollan organizes its insights: Fire, Water, Air, Earth. The chapter called “Air” is basically a meditation on bread – about how the whole genius of the invention of bread was to figure out how to somehow infuse enough air into ground-up grass to make it digestible, nourishing, even pleasurable. Pollan spends a lot of time on ingredients: wheat, flour, leaven. And *then*, he writes...

*...then there is the matter of the air...*

To compare a loaf of bread with a bowl of porridge is to realize how much of bread’s power, sensory as well as symbolic, resides precisely in those empty cells of spaces. Some 80 percent of a loaf of bread consists of nothing more than air. But air is not nothing.

In bread, it is where much of the flavor resides, and is the reason bread is so much more aromatic than porridge.

...Symbolically, too, air is not nothing. Air elevates our food, in every sense, raises it from the earthbound subsistence of gruel to something so fundamentally transformed as to hint at human and even divine transcendence. Air lifts food up out of the mud and so lifts us, dignifying both the food and its eaters. Surely it is no accident that Christ turned to bread to demonstrate his divinity; bread is partially inspired already, an everyday proof of the possibility of transcendence.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Some of his other books: *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*; *The Botany of Desire*; *Second Nature*; *In Defense of Food*.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Pollan, *Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation* (New York: Penguin, 2013).

What a glorious thing it is, then, that on this Lord's Day we are gathered together, again, around bread! What a profound celebration of air it is, this staff of life that began as grass of the field but then had space breathed into it – space enough for Spirit, space enough to come alive in Jesus's hands, space enough to have Jesus come alive in our hands, our body, this body, this church!

These are days of painful separation, terrible fear and great uncertainty, and no wonder: we shutter ourselves inside for fear of a respiratory illness, an invisible adversary that threatens to reverse the primordial power of God by stealing the air out of our very lungs. And we live on a planet with a respiratory illness: the air itself is changing, warming, and the intricacy of its original chemistry has been knocked out of its delicate balance with a massive, unholy tonnage of carbon that threatens to steal the life out of earth's very lungs.

Pollan goes on to say, "What other food could do all this symbolic work and yet still reliably fill human bellies? No wonder long stretches of European history can be told as the story of bread, or, rather, its two stories: a fight for access to bread on the part of Europe's peasantry and working class, and a fight over the meaning of bread on the part of its elite. For what was the Reformation if not an extended, centuries-long argument over the proper interpretation of bread?"

And into the midst of this terrible lockdown comes a kind of defiant breath that not only says to the tyrant virus, *we will not let you kill our spirit*, but also equips us to say to the atmosphere, *we will not let ourselves kill our home*.

The peace that Jesus breathed out upon us – the same breath that God breathed into our nostrils in the beginning – has the power to contain both of our respiratory illnesses, the power to flatten even those two daunting curves, because it is the most essential miracle of existence: the one you can't see, the one that fills every corner of every space without even trying, even the spaces inside us that are locked for fear. There is only one possible response to the miracle of it, the wonder of it, the beauty of it, and that is *gratitude*.

Gratitude is the air we breathe, that inspires the power to push back, to open the shuttered spaces and find our way back into life. Jesus breathes his peace into us, and we breathe out gratitude – and it's gratitude that will save us: gratitude for the ties to each other that (as we've been learning lately, the hard way) have kept us alive, and humbled gratitude for the ties to the intricate, luminous web of life on earth that keep us alive. His peace comes to us in the spaces for spirit within the bread of his body, that lifts us up from the mud and brings us alive.

Breath, like air, is not nothing – any more than our lungs can be said to be empty spaces. We crave it so much that we re-fill ourselves with it every 4 or 5 seconds or so. It comes from beyond us, yet it is of the essence of us, intrinsic to us. It is possible to be taking in air and not notice it, or not care; but for precisely that reason, the spiritual practices of many religions include disciplines of paying attention to it, re-knowing air for what it is when it becomes breath: something to revere. That's as true for us as a society, as we pay attention to the air we

breathe in common, as it is true for us as a globe, as we pay attention to the air that every single living creature depends on.

So take a deep breath, in honor of the Lord's Day – a deep breath for the work that begins again on this new day. Respiration is our most elemental bond: breathing in peace, breathing out gratitude – the only way to live. We are air-born. Respiration is the most sacred of all the responsibilities we hold in trust together. Respiration is the sign of hope that God has written in the open space within each of us, to prove He's there. And respiration is our act of defiance – the little defiant flag we wave in the face of all the respiratory threats as our way of saying, *Life is going on here! And we will preserve it!*