

Steve Jungkeit
The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Mark 11: 1-11; I Corinthians 2: 9-12
March 28, 2021

One Breath

Here's a scene that occurs with some frequency every time my kids are swimming at a pool. It's a scene that bears upon Palm Sunday, and what we've all gone through this past year. If I or Rachael are close enough in the water, each of them will say, "Ok, now time me. I'm going to hold my breath underwater for as long as I can." They take a deep breath and disappear from the surface, while one of us dutifully counts a thousand one, a thousand two, a thousand three, usually up to twenty or twenty five. Then their heads will pop up and they'll wish to know how long they managed to last. We tell them, and they're either pleased or disappointed, one or the other, and then they try again. I don't think they've ever lasted longer than thirty seconds. By then, their lungs are screaming for oxygen, and they come up gasping.

It's a curious human drama they're enacting, and I've lately come to believe it has more than a little significance. One breath gives them what they need to disappear beneath the surface, to exist for just a bit in a subterranean world that, even though it's merely a few feet away from the world outside the pool, can sometimes seem like an appealing alternative dimension.

That basic drama forms the backbone of a relatively new endurance sport called free diving. I read a book about it not long ago, one from which I borrowed the title for this sermon. But I confess I didn't fully appreciate what was happening in the sport until I watched a few videos, which as you might imagine, abound on Youtube. Take one from Guillaume Nery, for example, one of the foremost free divers in the world. He takes a breath, just one breath, and then he walks along on ocean floor until the surface of the water is some twenty feet above his head. But then he comes to a precipice, an enormous underwater cavern known as Dean's Blue Hole. It's in the Bahamas, and it descends more than 600 feet. To give you some perspective, the Prudential Building in Boston isn't much taller than that. The cavern is in the shape of a giant carafe. There's a wide opening at the top, but then it expands in width the deeper you go. You can watch Nery standing at the precipice, and then he dives down. After a few powerful breast strokes, he extends his arms, and then drops like a missile straight into the depths. While Nery doesn't touch bottom in that particular moment, people have managed to go to unimaginable depths – seven and eight hundred feet, as it happens. More commonly, though, they simply use one breath to explore a world that few people ever get to see, using little more than the elastic capacity of the human body to do so.

One breath, it turns out, can sustain a person for upwards of twenty minutes in shallow water. When competing for depth, it's a little different. The pressure of the water is such that a little over four minutes is the limit – which, to be fair, seems an enormous length of time to be deprived of oxygen. It turns out that the body adapts in miraculous ways. The chest and lungs contract against the pressure of the water, while the heart rate slows in order to conserve oxygen. Contrary to what you might believe, divers talk about a pervasive and overwhelming sense of peace and calm as they descend, which many liken to something primal, like reentering the

womb. Others liken it to something spiritual, where a feeling of blissful transcendence sets in. That feeling doesn't last forever, of course. Sooner or later during the ascent, back up toward the light, the body begins to crave oxygen. That's when, at the far edge of human limits, the diver breaks the surface and sucks in the air.

It might be better to say that by drawing in air, they inhale spirit. In both the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament, the word for Spirit can also be translated as "breath." *Ruach* is the Hebrew word. It's found nearly 400 times throughout the Hebrew Bible, nearly always translated as the Spirit of God. But we might just as easily translate it as breath. In the opening words of the Bible, the Spirit of God hovers above the unformed waters of the earth. More specifically, it is the *Ruach* of God that hovers there, the wind or breath of God. In the following chapter, when Adam is created, God breathes into Adam's lungs to give him life. But the breath that he receives isn't only breath – it's Spirit. It is that which he needs in order to become human, in order to stay alive, in order to be who he most deeply is. Breath, Wind, Spirit – these things are aspects of the Divine, and they're gifted to human beings in those early chapters.

But it's not only the Hebrew Bible. In the New Testament too, the word Spirit also can be translated as breath. There, the word is *pneuma*. The *pneuma* of God, the breath of God, blows where it will, Jesus tells his disciples. When he wishes to confer his own Spirit upon those same disciples, he gives them his breath, an echo of Adam and God in the garden. When the Holy Spirit descends upon the disciples at Pentecost, it comes as a wind, a kind of warm air. And when the Apostle Paul writes in I Corinthians about the life of the Spirit, he uses that same word, *pneuma*, breath, to describe what has been given to each of us – the breath of God, infused into our very being.

Let's go back to that children's game in the pool for just a bit. Are they not demonstrating a powerful human truth – that with every breath we take in something of the Spirit itself? We inhale deeply, and that intake of breath, wind, spirit, *ruach*, *pneuma*, can sustain us for long periods of time – for my kids, upwards of 30 seconds before they need more spirit, more breath, in order to sustain them. Free divers descending to the bottom of the ocean reveal even more – that with one breath, one powerful intake of *pneuma*, you can sustain yourself for minutes at a time, even at unimaginable depths. What if kids in pools and free divers in the sea were reminding us of what has been true all along – that with a sharp intake of Spirit, we can reside in the depths? That beneath the surface, sustained by that one intake of breath, we can achieve a peace and calm that travels with us to the floor of the ocean, and back up again to the moment that we break the surface and breathe again?

That's something of what's happening on Palm Sunday, as Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey. He knows full well the ordeal that lies before him. The cleansing of the temple, the final supper with his friends, the turmoil of the garden, and then the arrest, the trial, the crucifixion – he sees it all looming. And yet he rides on to Jerusalem anyway. I imagine the scene as something akin to descending underwater. I imagine Jesus breathing deeply as he rides the donkey. With each breath, I imagine him taking in the Spirit, taking in all he needs to sustain him for what lies ahead. The donkey ride is that last moment of breath before submerging himself into the depths. What are the spiritual resources he takes in during that ride?

Clearly Scripture is on his mind. He quotes it often throughout the coming week, and it's clear that the words of the old writers helped to orient him. The Psalms seem to be favorites, as are some prophetic texts. It's also clear that he relies on his friends, even if he knows they'll desert him in a crucial moment. Still, he sees the deeper truth of their profound worth as people, as friends, and he does what he can to uphold their dignity, even when they themselves do not. He trusts in the healing vision of human flourishing that he's practiced all along, knowing that even if the worst befalls him, that vision would still be carried forth. But above all, he carries within him a powerful connection to that within the world that he names his heavenly Father – a loving Presence that has been there with him all along. There seems to be within him a sense that he can withstand the most terrible of ordeals – the abandonment, the ignominy, the pain – because he is sustained and upheld by his Father, who accompanies him even unto the cross, even unto the grave. It is true that in his last moments Jesus does feel forsaken. He gives voice to that sense of abandonment when he quotes Psalm 22, “my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” But even there, he relies upon a bedrock source of wisdom, a poem that he has memorized, in order to express his anguish. I suspect each and every one of those elements formed a crucial component of the breath that he drew in on that ride into Jerusalem. They were the molecules of oxygen that he takes in as he rides into the week called Holy. I imagine Jesus on the donkey, breathing in each of those elements, each of them aspects of the ruach, the pneuma, the wind that is the Spirit of God. I imagine him preparing to go under on that fateful ride. Later in the week, he does go under, but he has breath, spirit, enough to see him through, all the way until Easter morning.

Holy week represents the human situation in extremis. But it resonates so powerfully because it speaks to the profundity of what it is to be human. It's not simply the story of Jesus we're hearing. It's a story about our own lives too. We know what it is to go under. In a very real way, we have gone under this year. We know what it is to hold our breath under the surface for prolonged periods of time. We know what it is to take in the spirit, the breath, that we need for the time that we're submerged. But we also know something of what it means to be rising toward the surface, our lungs screaming for air.

Isn't that what we've done this past year? Isn't that something of what the pandemic has revealed to us? A year ago, we took one breath, and then we were forced below the surface, into the deep. I don't know about you, but that's something of what the pandemic has felt like to me - like dwelling in a watery underworld that's kept me separated from the world as I've known it. I'm down here somewhere, below the surface, while life itself is up there, visible, even audible to a certain extent, but also impossibly remote. And not only for me. It's as though every single one of us has existed in our own personal Deep Blue Hole, and we're all at varying depths below the waters. Some of us have traveled so far into the deep that the pressure has nearly crushed us. Some of us have remained relatively close to the surface, so that we can see the other divers and some rafts, even if we can't yet reach them. But I think we've all been down there, under the water, for a long time now. And I think many of us are dying to come up for air, our lungs screaming for oxygen.

Still, it's worth pondering the miracle of that one breath, and how it can and has sustained us. At the beginning of this whole endeavor, two weeks of potential lockdown felt interminable. Three weeks, then four, then five – each of them felt impossible, like children adding a few more

seconds to their time underwater. But then we learned something crucial: that it was possible to stay under for much longer than we imagined. We learned that, once we calmed ourselves, we could find a profound peace there beneath the surface. And we found places of hidden beauty that we otherwise wouldn't have imagined – in relationships or a reawakened sense of spirituality, in gratitude for those who make the world work, and in a newfound sense of connection to the planet. There's been profound discomfort too, and it's true that there are losses that have no recompense. Even so, with one breath – a sharp intake of spirit – we've managed to do something that no one would have believed possible a year ago. Breath, spirit, has sustained us in the depths.

That intake of spirit, that one deep and sustaining breath, what did it consist of for you? What was the spirit that you breathed in, allowing you to function beneath the surface of the waters? What was the life sustaining thing, or things, that you drew into yourself in order to get through this ordeal? What is the spirit that you took in, in order to plumb the depths? We've each had our own experiences of the pandemic, and so it must also be true that we've each been sustained in ways particular to our own lives. Some of you, I know, have found ways to connect to other people in ways we hadn't before. Some of you have delved into classic literature, as a means of reacquainting yourselves with those who have thought carefully about the hard questions of life. Others of you, I know, have turned to nature, and have spent more time than you ever have in the natural world. There are others too who have opened new dimensions in their spiritual lives, learning to pray in new ways. I know that more than a few have pursued questions of racial justice as a means of sustaining themselves during this time.

But I also know that some of what has sustained us has been imperceptible, like the air we breathe. It's there, it's entering us, exiting us, coursing through our blood, animating our being, but it's not something we can grasp. Spirit is like that. It's the blessed assurance, come to us from we know not where, that something beyond ourselves is holding the world together. It's the confidence that, even in our darkest moments, that our lives have purpose and worth. It's the calm that can suddenly descend upon us even when the pressure is squeezing our hearts and lungs, the peace that reaches us even in the middle of that inky darkness of the deep. It's the force that sustains us through the deep, the very one that slowly, slowly, keeps pulling us back up toward life.

That Spirit has accompanied us all along. It's been within us all along. And you know what? We're almost there. We're almost at the top. I know you're dying for oxygen. I know you need another breath. I know you need another infusion of spirit, and it's coming, I promise. I know that more than anything, all you want to do is get to the surface. It will happen, and soon. Let Holy Week, let Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and most of all Easter Sunday be a sign and a promise unto you, a sign and a promise not unlike my children in the pool: you shall shortly break the surface of the waters. You shall breathe, and that breath shall be the Spirit coursing through you, a truth as ancient as the Scriptures, as real as a child floating to the surface of a pool. You'll breathe, and you shall be restored.