

Sermon Archive 355

Sunday 15 August, 2021

Knox Church, Ōtautahi, Christchurch

Readings, Reflections and Voluntaries

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A series of Readings, Reflections and Organ Pieces on the theme: The Breath of God

Introduction:

In the Hebrew language, the language of the first testament of the Bible, the word for spirit (ruach) is the same as the word for wind. In Greek, the language of the New Testament, it's the same. "Pneuma" (from which we get words like "pneumatic") means both wind and spirit. So through the original Biblical text, there's always a bit of a play on words when it comes to talking about God as spirit. From the earliest creation stories to the final breathing of spirit upon the disciples, from the psalmist grieving the coming of death at the withdrawal of breath, to the wind and fire of Pentecost, life and breath and the spirit of God have been entwined. So in celebration of a machine that pushes air through pipes to make sound and living music, I bring four short reflections on the breath of God.

Reading: Genesis 2: 1-7

Reflection: Creative, life-giving breath

It's certainly not an industrial, mass-productive process. It's not quite a domestic duty. It's more like an artist in a studio - maybe a potter with some clay. The usual wheel upon which the clay is thrown is absent; the Creator just takes up globs of material and presses it together in the hands. Of course, an adequate shape is made of the soil, with finger prints left all over it. The imperfections add to the art, while the work just sits there.

But then there's this moment of brilliance. The Creator breathes air into it . . . And the finger-printed, imperfectly formed, dull thing now lives. Now, with its own motion, mind and heart, it lives.

What is this breath that makes muddy physical stuff into sentient being? What is this breath that separates us from being just earth, and makes us living expressions of the artist? What is this breath that calls us from inert substance, to those who live, who breathe and dream, who love, who mourn, who hope and care? Creative beings . . . what is this breath?

Some of us like to ponder this matter - we philosophers, poets and quintessential mad-men. Most of us, though, just grow into it and harvest things *from* it - it's called "just getting on with life". But for now, as a story is told of breath filling the physical thing, making us human, it's pause for thought. Even if the thought isn't crowned with a glorious "answer" (this is what human life is), it gives us room for marvelling at the mystery. We live. We breathe. We think and hope and care.

Air moves through an organ pipe, and we are given room to contemplate the *creative, life giving* breath of God.

Organ Voluntary: 'Activity', from "Frozen Planet", George Fenton (b. 1949)

Reading: Ezekiel 37: 1-7

Reflection: Redemptive, returning, bone-rattling breath

The living things, capable of breath, dreaming, loving, mourning hope and care, used their gift of life and movement. Off they went! And somehow, in their interactions with other creatures bearing the Creator's gnarly fingerprints, ended up in some kind of exile. They took themselves to the point of being a valley of dry bones - no life, no movement, certainly no momentum. In exile, culture breathed its last. Identity breathed its last. In exile, hope ever of being at home (I know the shape of the hills, I know the sound of the river, I know where my blood lines track) breathed its last.

I don't know; why do we, who have been moved from earth to expression, from stuff to significance, find our life with others, and with the planet, turning us into a valley of dry bones? Where did all the life go? Well, as the prophet speaks to our God for us, from amid his scene (painted as if by some sad dystopian artist) all he can say is "I don't know; but Lord God, *you* know".

Well, the God who knows sends breath to the bones in the valley. We're told there's a strange rattling sound.

To the Covid sufferers of Myanmar, a strange rattling sound. To the frightened of Afghanistan during a time of military withdrawal, a strange rattling sound? To any of those others cited in last week's sermon about peace, shall there be a strange rattling sound - speaking to them of the *re*-creating breath of God?

The One who gave us breath at the start comes again, as the One who comes even when we've turned life into death. Air moves through an organ pipe. Bringing death to life, it's the life-giving *redemptive, returning, bone-rattling* breath of God.

Organ Voluntary: "That rattling sound", Daniel Cooper (b. 1997)

Reading: John 3: 1-8

Reflection: Independent, surprising breath

That good old breath of God! Hey, what if we could bottle it? (Not bottle it, but bottle it.) "Fat chance!" says Jesus. "You can't contain the breath of God". Kind of part of the point is its being free, moving beyond what we might plan and pre-judge. It'll come and go as it wants. It'll blow here and there, as it wants. It'll bring life to Nicodemus, if it wants. It'll hover over the waters if it wants,. It'll deliberately not be "in the earthquake wind and fire", if it wants. Never second to be guessed, no matter what dry-valley-ing we have ready, it will do as it wants, move as it wants, be as it wants.

In the Spirit, Baxter sings: "Lord, Holy Spirit, You blow like the wind in a thousand paddocks, Inside and outside the fences, You blow where you wish to blow."

So, be careful with this thought, people! - because God's breathing might blow towards the man who punched the horse in the Sydney Covid protest. It might blow towards the Belarusians detaining Roman Protasevich. It might blow towards Eli Epiha's blood-stained hands. And if it did blow there, and life came forth again, it might mean that we'd need to change the judgments we've made about the wicked people. Changing of mind! Wouldn't that be a breath of God!

As Jesus speaks of the breath of God being wild and free (no one knows from where it comes, or where it goes), there is no attribution to God of capricious intent. There is no drunken whim. It's a wonderful, poetic description of a breath of life that's way beyond our planning and prejudice. It is freer than the human

imagination. Air passes through an organ pipe, and, giving life, it's the ***independent, surprising*** breath of God.

Anthem: "The Spirit of God rests upon me", Lucien Deiss (1921-2007)

Reading: John 20: 19-23

Reflection: The forgiving breath of peace

That's almost all for the moment. Breath as a bringer of life, of human being. Breath as a re-creative power when all our best efforts have led to dryness and death. Breath as the wonderful freedom of God, inspiring us to marvel and wonder.

But now, finally, just before he takes his leave from those he's loved, we find Jesus breathing upon his people. Having become a somewhat battered and bruised old thing in his service of God, but living in an undying kind of way, his breathing becomes for them a sharing of the Spirit that's always moved him. Was he inspired to love? Was he inspired to hope? Was he inspired to stand strong and tall for what is good? Well, if he was, now he breathes ***that*** into them. They, themselves, now are vessels for the life that he has expressed.

Nearer the beginning, he'd talked about the Spirit being upon him. What had he said? It was something about bringing good news to the poor. It was about proclaiming release to the captives and sight to the blind. It was the oppressed going free, and something called the "year of the Lord's favour". All that! And this time, as he breathes life into the people, he says it's also going to be about the power to forgive.

Dare we imagine a world where we have the power to forgive? Enemies are embracing. Hurts are being healed. People and planet are being at peace. Peace. Maybe, excuse the pun, it's just a "pipe dream". Or maybe, if the breath of God is breathed upon us, we have yet to see what wonders have been prepared for those who love with the love of Christ.

Air passes through an organ pipe, and our hope for peace expands. It is the forgiving breath of peace.

Hymn: Put peace into each other's hands

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