

Gates Presbyterian Church

*Breathing in the Spirit*

April 11, 2021

This morning, we have the wonderful joy of baptizing Brady John Millington and formally welcoming him into the life of our church community. He and his family have been waiting a long time for this moment. We finally gather today, at least partially in person, to celebrate this sacrament, reminding ourselves as well that we are all baptized into Christ, invited into relationship with him and offered the gift of the Holy Spirit, in which and through which, we are to live and move and have our being.

You may remember that, in our denomination, we talk about baptism as being the sign and the seal of our incorporation into Christ. We do not earn it, or buy it, and it cannot be taken from us. It is a gift God gives us, a sign of the covenant God makes with us. Being baptized does not mean that we have perfect faith. It does not mean that we don't doubt. It does not mean that we don't sin. It *does* mean that we are offered the constant companionship of the Holy Spirit, promised the presence of God's saving grace, and assured of the hope of the resurrection and eternal life.

That's a big gift for a small child to receive!

In fact, it is one that I think we take a lifetime to absorb and respond to. And that is as it should be.

This morning, paired with our baptism celebration, we read also about Thomas and his doubts. Poor Thomas, he was surely defined by far more than this one moment in his life, but he has acquired the name "doubting Thomas" and it has stuck to him for the ages.

I don't know about you, but I think it's a bit unfair. After all, the group who met Jesus first had the chance to see his wounds and hear his voice in the moment when they were also asked to believe. Even Mary, first to meet Jesus, had to hear his voice before she recognized who he was. Thomas is just asking for the same physical presence that the others were able to experience before professing his own belief. We should also note that the disciples, despite having seen and heard Jesus the week before, despite having received the Holy Spirit and been sent by Jesus into the world, remain locked in their room, hiding from the Jewish leaders. If their faith is stronger than Thomas', why aren't they out in the world already proclaiming the good news?

My point, of course, is that doubt is prevalent all over this community. Doubt appears, in fact, to be a part of faith. Thomas' words, for me, in their honesty and courage express what many others may have been feeling (including, perhaps, those who have already seen Jesus; including perhaps some of us sitting here today).

Especially in the context of the trauma and grief they have experienced leading up to Jesus' resurrection appearances, perhaps we can forgive the disciples for being unable to take in this new news that, despite all the horrors and loss of the previous days, Jesus, and God's love, have prevailed. With such a rollercoaster ride from the joy of Palm Sunday through the losses of holy week and back to the joy of the resurrection, it must have been really hard to keep up emotionally.

To wrestle with what we believe, then, is to take seriously Jesus' teachings and the witness of the resurrection. The fact is, it *is* challenging to have faith. Especially in our day and age, when our community places such a high value on scientific explanations for things, to express faith is often to appear foolish. To doubt, is simply to acknowledge that we struggle with this new way of discerning God's being – a way that involves the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the palpable presence of our God

instead of a set of carefully constructed experiments that may prove the hypothesis that God exists and stands before us as Jesus.

The good news, of course, is that we get a lifetime of opportunities to meet Jesus in the flesh and to face our doubts and to believe. Jesus was not stopped that day by the closed, locked doors. His followers were gathered and so he was present also. For, as he had already taught them, “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” (Matthew 18:20)

This is no less true for us today. Whenever a few of us are gathered, as indeed we are this morning, some present in person, others with us via our virtual church, Jesus dwells with us. We can see him in the smiling faces that offer greetings to all who enter. We can hear him in the sounds of beautiful music and in voices raised in prayer. We can touch him in the elbow bumps of our greetings and the water of our baptism. We can feel his presence in the rush of the Holy Spirit at the reading of the Word or the offering of communion.

And we encounter Jesus out in the community too where, together, we make up Christ’s body. We see him in the faces of those who mourn and those who offer comfort. We hear him in the conversation among soup kitchen guests and the greetings of the workers offering them food. We touch him in the small hands we hold as we guide our children across a street and in the elbow bumps we offer when we finally see an old friend.

We see him in the eyes of a homeless man when we greet him by name and check on his wellbeing. We feel his presence in the witness of those whose faith shines forth no matter their life circumstance or need. Jesus is everywhere for us to encounter and care for, listen to and follow.

Just as he opened his physical self to Thomas for his inspection, Jesus offers us the chance to see and inspect him too in order that we might believe. The challenge for us is to look around and recognize where Jesus is showing us his wounds and inviting us to come for a closer examination so that we, also, might see and understand his presence as God-with-us.

In this particular moment especially, the world’s brokenness surrounds us. Finding Jesus in these places creates a powerful image for us to follow. Where *do* we see Jesus in his wounds? In the face of a child who is hungry; in the body of a man held down so he cannot breathe; in the exhausted posture of one who has worked a double shift and lost another patient; in the despair of a teacher who cannot reach the child she is trying to teach; in the isolation of a jail cell or the purgatory of addiction.

The risen Jesus, then, awaits us in all the broken places of the world. At the same time, we must ask ourselves along with the first disciples, where might we be locking our doors out of fear, preventing Jesus from entering our midst or perhaps trying to keep safe from the prophetic word he brings us?

When Jesus calls us to follow him into the world, it is not an easy task to take up. Following Jesus requires sacrifice and courage. It means stepping outside our comfort zones to meet people where they are and share the abundance that God gives us with our neighbors who have less than they need.

It means being willing to hear prophetic truths that charge us with not living up to our promises to love God and love our neighbor.

It means turning away from self interest and personal gain to put the good of the community ahead of ourselves.

To truly follow Jesus, as we read in our Acts passage this morning, is to share all we have with anyone who has need; to share our resources and not claim anything as our own. If we take this seriously, it will cause us to rethink everything about how we order our lives. What do we do about the tension between this idea of communal living that shares God's abundance with all equally, and our culture's deeply held belief that the true American way involves defining success by how much money, power and status one can achieve individually.

To embrace life as a follower of Jesus is to ask ourselves hard questions about how we use our resources, not just our physical resources like access to safe, affordable housing, high quality education for our children, abundant food, jobs that pay more than a living wage, and robust healthcare. But also other resources like status and power and influence.

One of my pastor mentors taught me early on – you can get anything done if you are willing to give away the credit. So as we consider sharing our resources, I wonder, where is God calling us to set aside ego and status in order to accomplish a bigger goal? Where is Jesus calling us to share our power and our privilege so that all can flourish?

When some of us flourish at the expense of our neighbors down the road who live with the constant threat of homelessness, whose children must attempt to learn in schools where hunger and violence and inadequate resources surround them, who must find healthy food while living in a place where the corner store provides the only meal options in over-priced, processed food, whose jobs pay less than a living wage and whose health is compromised by a lack of insurance or adequate preventative care resources. When we flourish at this cost, isn't Jesus teaching us that we must pay attention to these places of brokenness, for these are His wounds too?

How do we balance what we feel we have earned with what we, as children of God, are asked to share with our neighbors so that, as we read in Acts, not a person among us is needy?

These are hard conversations and hard questions. Of course, we cannot even begin to approach living in this way through our own efforts. Even as Easter people we still live in the deep humanity that defines us as broken, imperfect children of God who constantly fall short and yet, as people of faith, always rise again to try anew.

To this end, it cannot escape our notice that right on the heels of encountering Jesus, his followers also receive the holy spirit. Once again, they do not earn it by their stellar acts of faith – indeed, they are locked fearfully in their rooms. They do not win it by being the most outspoken evangelists, indeed, they do not appear to have proclaimed any good news at all – and perhaps they do not actually recognize the recent events as good news in the first place.

But Jesus does not give up on them, he arrives anyway, bringing them his peace and offering the apostles a new companion to accompany them on the way – the gift of the holy spirit, breathed right into their bodies. This breath of the Spirit reminds us of the breath of creation when the mighty winds moved over the face of the deep and God created humans and breathed life into them. It echoes back to the story of the prophet Ezekiel prophesying to the breath to come into the dry bones of the people of God that they might live again. Just as the prophets of old and God God's self, have made use of breath to create and renew, Jesus too offers this breath, this pneuma, this spirit to guide and inspire us in Jesus' holy ways.

Today, as we baptize Brady, we are reminded that we too have been given this gift of the holy spirit, enfolded in it in our own baptisms and marked as Christ's own forever.

Take a deep breath now. (breathe in – breathe out). And one more time.

Can you feel your body relax a little bit? You know if you take a few deep breaths, your pulse rate slows down, your blood pressure decreases. Breathing – we take it for granted but it is intrinsic to our most basic selves. Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into us.

He is our breath of life in so many ways.

One of my favorite ways to pray – especially in the middle of the night when I cannot sleep – is the Breath Prayer. Are you familiar with it? You pick a couple of simple phrases, the first one, as you breathe in, calling God by name, the second one, as you breathe out, a simple petition. Lately, I have been praying for the son of a friend who was seriously injured in a hit and run car accident. In the darkest part of the night, when something has awakened me, I pray, “Healing God, restore John’s sight.” As I breathe in and out, mindful of my breath, thinking about John and feeling for God’s presence, I can feel my own body relax. I notice the peace that comes to me. I know somehow that John will be made whole. I don’t know how or what that will look like, but I know it in a way that has nothing to do with my intellect and everything to do with some sixth sense that is tuned to God and God’s healing grace.

I think this is what it means for Jesus to offer us his peace and to breath the holy spirit into our lives. At the most basic level, taking in the Holy Spirit offers us peace and rest in the middle of the chaos and brokenness of life. I cannot imagine a more stressful context than the one we find the disciples in when they receive this gift. They genuinely fear for their own lives. They are mourning the loss of someone they loved and revered and, more than that, they are realizing that their dream of salvation – meaning freedom from the Roman oppressors – will not come to pass. The Messiah they thought they knew did not save them in the way generations of their people had anticipated. Many of them probably doubt.

But none of that matters to Jesus. He is not waiting for them to be perfect followers. He is not waiting for them to understand the magnitude of what has happened. He is not waiting for them to write out a beautifully crafted theological statement on grace and salvation. He comes to them huddled in the locked rooms and offers them himself – the breath of life, the new companion for their journey – the Holy Spirit. And he offers them his peace.

All of this is offered to us, too – Jesus offers it today as we baptize Brady, he offers it tomorrow as we face the world anew, he extends the invitation in the weeks and months to come as we emerge from the pandemic to make our way in a transformed and unfamiliar world.

The beauty and the miracle of being an Easter people is that we can receive the Holy Spirit every time we breathe in.

It is available to us no matter whether our faith feels solid or we are rocked by doubt.

It enfolds us in our brokenness and in our wholeness, wherever it finds us.

It is truly the breath of life. And we have already been given it.

My friends, breathe in the spirit and rejoice. Our Lord is risen. The Holy Spirit has come. Now let us go out into the world to proclaim the good news.