

“Take a Breath”
June 7, 2020

John 20:19-29
Isaiah 5:1-10

The deaths have been too many for too long.

The injustice has been too great for too long.

Black lives matter. We proclaim that here. We seek to live out the consequences of that statement. And yet that truth does not dwell deeply in the heart of this nation.

Whether it was 18 year old Michael Brown, killed by police in Ferguson, or 14 year old Tamir Rice, killed by police in Cleveland or 15 year old Jordan Edward, killed by police in suburban Dallas, or 26 year old Breona Taylor, killed by police in Louisville, or 46 year old George Floyd killed by police in Minneapolis, or any of those whose deaths have gone unrecognized, the militarization of our police forces and the violence of racism are readily apparent.

Over half a century ago, Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote that “Police brutality, with community support, or at best indifference, is a daily experience for Negroes in all too many areas of the South.” We used to hear those words with a smugness that thought, “But not up here.” Today, however, we should add, “and in the North as well.” And all too often this reality is met with our Northern indifference.

King’s words in “A Testament of Hope,” published after his death read as though they were written in recent months:

If you try to tell the people in most Negro communities that the police are their friends, they just laugh at you....Police must cease being occupation troops...and start protecting...residents. Yet very few cities have faced up to this problem and tried to do something about it.ⁱ

We despair over the situation because it has been the same for so long. When we hear King’s words or those of the prophet Isaiah: “God expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry,” we lament that nothing changes, that unnecessary deaths and great injustice continue unabated.

In our congregation we’ve read the books, we’ve heard the sermons, we’ve worked to get out the vote, we’ve allied ourselves with African-American congregations in the Johnson County Interfaith Coalition.

Yet here we are, after more than a week of protest and marches in Iowa City, after more than a week of protest and marches across the nation and around the world. And the violence continues. The racism continues.

We are painfully aware that there is more for us to do—much more. There is more listening, more conversation, more voting, more political action, more change required.

And we worry that we are not up to the task.

So what should we do today?

The Civil Rights attorney, Ben Crump, who is working with the family of George Floyd, gave us some direction when he said this past week: “What [George] needed was a breath. The family’s [now] asking for everyone to take a breath for peace, take a breath for justice, take a breath to heal our country and take a breath for George.”

After all the marching and the crying and shouting

After all the outrage and the anguish

We need to pause.

We need to regain our bearings.

The work will still be there. The great need will still be there.

But we need to take a breath.

Do something with me, will you? Take a deep breath in through your nose and let it out.

When we’re stressed our breathing becomes shallow. And when we breathe through our mouths we can actually create feelings of stress.

We usually don’t think about breathing. Let us do so now.

Take a breath for peace.

Take a breath for justice.

Take a breath to heal our country.

Take a breath for George Floyd.

You probably remember that in the Hebrew and Greek of the Bible, the words that we translate as “breath” are also the words that we translate as “spirit.” So the risen Christ *breathes* on the disciples and tells them “Receive the Holy *Spirit*”—the *breath* of God.

In the midst of our stress, in the face of all has worn on us in the past week and the recent months, we need to take a breath, to seek renewal, and to attend to our spirits so that we might have the strength we need for the work ahead.

This morning we heard a story from the Gospel of John that speaks to weary and worn-out people.

Late on a Sunday the disciples gather together behind locked doors out of fear.

Suddenly the risen Christ is standing among them. The bolted doors of fear are no barrier.

The risen Christ does not know the barricades of locked hearts any more than the barricades of locked doors.

The risen Christ is not limited by our closed minds any more than our closed windows.

The risen Christ will not be constrained by our fears—real or imagined.

To frightened hearts he speaks a word of peace. To those who are weary he speaks of *shalom*—wholeness and healing. And so that there is no doubt about this peace *or* the One who offers it, he shows his hands and his side which still, even in this resurrected body, bear the signs of suffering.

The One who knew the human condition of pain and death speaks the word of peace again. As if to say this peace will be a central experience of those who chose to follow.

And then Jesus does the strangest thing.

He *breathes* on the disciples.

“Receive the Holy Spirit,” he says. Take *this* breath. Take *this spirit*, for it is what you need to be alive.

The great poet, James Weldon Johnson, imagined God at creation:

[Kneeling] down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay
Till he shaped it in his own image;

Then into it he blew the breath of life,
And man became a living soul.

Just as God breathed the breath of life into the first human being, so the risen Christ breathed new life, a *holy* spirit into the disciples.

God’s word at the end of the first creation was, “It’s good—very good!” Everything’s all right.

God’s word at the end of this new creation is more like: “It can be good—if that’s what you want, if that’s what you’re willing to work toward.” The new creation of resurrections offers reconciliation—relationships being set right—if we will continue in the hard work given to us.

On the day of the new creation, on the day of resurrection, the risen Christ sends the disciples into the world with a mission and with the energy of the Holy Spirit.

We take a breath—we “receive the Holy Spirit,” the breath of life—so that we can move forward once more.

Last week, as Ben Crump addressed the crowd, he called us again to breathe:

He said: “I also want us to remember ... Breonna Taylor, the young lady who was executed in the sanctity of her own home in Louisville, Kentucky. So let’s take a breath for Breonna as well. Let’s take a breath for Ahmaud Arbery as well. Let’s take a breath for Terence Crutcher as well.

“Let’s take a breath for Pamela Turner, who was killed in Houston. Let’s take a breath for Alto Sterling who was killed in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Let’s take a breath for Fernando Castile who was killed here in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Let’s take a breath for Laquan McDonald who was killed in Chicago, Illinois. Let’s take a breath for Sandra Bland, who was killed in Texas. Let’s take a breath for Natasha McKenny who was killed by police in Virginia. Let’s take a breath for Stefan Clark, who was killed in Sacramento, California. Let’s take a breath for Corey Jones who was killed in Palm Beach, Florida. Let’s take a breath for Bothum Joan, who was killed in his own apartment in Dallas, Texas. Let’s take a breath for Eric Gardner who was killed in Staten Island, New York. Let’s take a breath for Freddie Gray who was killed in Baltimore, Maryland. Let’s take a breath for Walter Scott who was killed in South Carolina.

“Let’s take a breath for Jamar Clark, who was killed here in Minneapolis. Let’s take a breath for Michael Brown, who was killed in Ferguson. Let’s take a breath for 12 year old Tamir Rice who was killed in Cleveland, Ohio by the police. Let’s take a breath for Trayvon Benjamin Martin who was killed in Sanford, Florida. Let’s take a breath for Emmett Till who was killed in Mississippi. Let’s take a breath collectively for all of the marginalized and disenfranchised and de-humanized people, whether black, brown, white, or red who were killed unjustifiably, who were killed unnecessarily and who were killed senselessly because they are American citizens, one. They are human beings, two. And finally, we should all remember, they are children of God.”

Let us no longer take our breath for granted. Let each breath become an act of remembrance. And through that memory may our breath become holy—a spirit of life that empowers us, a spirit of life that strengthens us for all that we need to do in the days, weeks, months, and years to come a spirit of life that restores our nation, our world

Living, breathing children of God.

There is much more for us to do for all of God’s children.

Take a breath.

And move forward.

ⁱ MLK, “A Testament of Hope,” in *A Testament of Hope*, pg. 325.