

Dwelling

Genesis 2:7, Joel 2:28-30, Acts 2:1-4

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I was on the campus of St. Olaf College in Northfield, MN, to hear an evening concert featuring the combined choirs and orchestra. After parking, I walked across the Commons toward Skoglund Center. It was mid-winter; the temperatures were hovering in the teens. I had my gloves on, my scarf wrapped around my neck, and my jacket was zipped all the way up as the stiff breeze blew against me. That's when I heard it... the delicate sound of wind chimes. I stopped for a moment to listen. What direction was this sound coming from? Where were those chimes? Who put them there? A few minutes later, I was standing under the Memorial Chime Tower. In 2003, members of the St. Olaf College community came together to create a lasting memorial to commemorate the lives of students who had died while enrolled at St. Olaf. Currently, there are 116 chimes all tuned to the key of D, the key of the beloved hymn "Beautiful Savior," each engraved with a names of those 116 students.

On windy days, breezy nights, the sound of those chimes can be heard almost everywhere on campus. But without a breeze, those chimes make no sound at all. Without even the slightest bit of wind, there wouldn't be the gentle reminder of the Spirit of each of those students and the breath that once filled each of those students' lives whose names are engraved on those chimes. Without oxygen coursing through our lungs, we would be lifeless.

Belden Lane, in his book, *The Great Conversation: Nature and the Care of the Soul*, connects the dots between the breath we breathe – and take for granted most of the time – and the Spirit dwelling within us, giving us each breath as a gift of life. He writes this:

"Our first intense experience of the world comes through breathing—gasping for air. For the rest of our lives, this happens automatically, without conscious effort, handled by a respiratory control center at the base of the brain. We breathe an average of 28,000 times a day. But breath is more than a physiological

function. It represents an interior, spiritual dimension of a life that is more than us. In the [ancient poem of creation in the] book of Genesis, breathing brought the first humans into existence, filling them with the 'breath of life.' Called by various names—[including the Greek word, Pneuma, and the Hebrew word Ruach], breath is a divine energy recognized across every religious tradition."

We're beginning a new series called "Dwelling." As we move through the season of Lent, we'll be focusing on what it means for us to dwell in God's presence, with God, as God dwells in us through the Spirit who gives us life. We call this dwelling the "Incarnation," which is the big, beautiful, churchy word for the central Christian understanding that God became human; that God became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood in the form of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. If all of that sounds complicated, you're not wrong. There are all kinds of metaphors that might be helpful: the incarnation means that the Spirit of God lives within us and through us, gives us each breath as a gift, and acts as the engine that inspires, animates and empowers us to be the physical presence of Christ in the world.

This incarnation – this dwelling – is rooted in countless places in scripture. Let me just give you three. And as I read these, I'd like to ask you to engage your imagination; close your eyes if you like and let these images stir in you while I read.

First from Genesis 2:7 [MSG]: After God had created the heavens and the earth, day and night, water, land, trees, plants, large animals, small animals, sea creatures, cattle, reptiles, bugs, and fish – *"the LORD God then formed the [hu]man from the dust of the ground. God breathed the breath of life into the [hu]man's nostrils, and the [hu]man became a living person."*

Did you catch it? God's breath, which is God's Spirit – the Holy Spirit was first breathed into humankind, and gave humankind life. Our breathing is a sign of God's presence in us. Every breath we breathe is a gift of new life – each and every one, a gift of life from God.

Here's another passage, from Joel 2:28-30 [NLT]: On the way toward creating a new community of faithful people, God said, *"I will pour out my Spirit upon all people. Your sons and daughters will [speak the Good News of God's salvation on behalf of God]. Your old*

men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions. In those days I will pour out my Spirit even on servants—men and women alike. And I will cause wonders in the heavens and on the earth.”

So you see, as the Holy Spirit dwells in us, and we dwell in God’s Spirit, God actively inspires, animates, and empowers us to embody the Good News of hope for the world.

In the book of Acts, chapter 2, as the church is born and people’s lives are being inspired, animated and empowered with the Good News of Jesus’ resurrection – the ultimate transformation – the Holy Spirit filled the lives of those early believers: *“When the Feast of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Without warning, there was a sound like a strong wind, gale force—no one could tell where it came from. It filled the whole building. Then, like a wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks, and they started speaking in a number of different languages as the Spirit prompted them.”* [MSG]

The power of God’s transformational love began to spread as more and more people learned that God’s power became tangible in their lives.

Is your head spinning yet? That’s okay. Spiritual push-ups and sit-ups are good for us. But let’s go a little deeper.

The first Incarnation, or dwelling of God, happened in Jesus. Jesus embodied God’s presence, and explained to his followers that when they saw him, they saw God. In our lives, we know the love and grace of God by looking to Jesus.

The second Incarnation, or dwelling, happens in us. On one level, every human being embodies the Spirit, God’s life-giving breath within them. If someone is breathing, they’re carrying the breath of God in them – they are a spirited person whether they know that or not, whether they accept that, or not. That’s not up for debate. What we do with that breath is a choice. From a Lutheran perspective, we receive the Spirit at our baptism as a gift of grace and then we’re continually filled with the Holy Spirit throughout our lives. What we do with the breath that empowers us makes all the difference.

So, how do we awaken to the Spirit within us? If God is pouring the Spirit out on all people, and our sons and daughters, young and old alike are dreaming dreams and seeing visions, what does that mean for us? Over the next several weeks, we’ll explore aspects of the Spirit’s activity within us – how the Holy Spirit dwells

within us in ways that creates more life and aliveness.

First, we awaken to the Spirit within us... by exploring what it means to live into the freedom that the Spirit creates. In 2 Corinthians 3:17, Paul writes, *“For the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”* The Holy Spirit sets us free from trying to live by a set of rules, by regulations, and the fear of punishment. So many people describe their lived experience in the church as constantly trying to measure up, fit in, hit the mark, make the grade, and appease a god that seems more like Santa Claus, who sees you when you’re sleeping and knows when you’re awake, who knows if we’ve been bad or good, so we’d better be good, for goodness’ sake. Friends, that’s no way to live.

The Good News is that the Spirit invites us into a life of open grace that sets us free and equips us to bring life and aliveness to the world around us. That’s good news for so many people who continue to live as if God’s love must be earned, and God’s wrath avoided. When we acknowledge that the life we have been given, and the breath that has been breathed into us is a gift, then we are set free to respond with gratitude, love, and generosity. That’s the work of the Holy Spirit in and through us.

Second, we awaken to the Spirit within us...by paying attention to the Spirit’s work of correction and conviction. Working through the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous is some of the most powerful work you or I will ever do—whatever our addiction is. When we admit that we are powerless over whatever it is that’s making our lives unmanageable and we come to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity, we’re on the right road. But staying on that road is often the challenge. That’s why the rumble strips are on the edges of the road – to keep us from ending up in the ditch. Some time ago, Pastor Jeff referred to these rumble strips as the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. That has been a very helpful image for me. You know how it is, it’s mid-February and you’ve made a commitment to eating well, exercising often, drinking a lot of water and doing without a lot of the stuff that made you make that New Year’s Resolution in the first place. And suddenly I’m staring at a pan of pillowy soft, warm, yeasty cinnamon rolls fresh out of the oven. And with the cream cheese frosting already to go, I can’t for the life of me figure out why I shouldn’t eat two... or three. They’re small, they’re beautiful. They’re pillowy soft, warm, yeasty, cinnamon rolls fresh out of the oven, for

crying out loud! That's when the rumble strips come in handy. [make the sound...] Those rumble strips tell us that I'm in really dangerous territory, and about to drive head-long into the ditch. Those rumble strips, for me, are like the Holy Spirit reminding me that I'm veering off course. And with love and grace, I'm, called back to the center of the Spirit's presence. But the Spirit doesn't just stop there.

Third, we awaken to the Spirit within us...by being receptive to the Spirit revealing wisdom to guide us.

The Spirit reveals God's wisdom to guide us. This is actually the next step of the Spirit's work within us after we've become aware of the rumble strips. The Spirit leads us through the hard work of doing the fearless moral inventory of self-reflection which can lead us back to life. The Spirit searches our hearts and minds and reveals anything that is misaligned with the heart and intentions of God. Let me break that one down a bit.

I know a lot of people – myself included – who were taught to imagine the Holy Spirit as a teacher with a red pen, going through the narrative of our lives just looking to expose our failures and mistakes. But how much better to imagine the work of the Spirit as lovingly aligning our lives to the aliveness that Jesus promises? How amazing to think that through the Spirit we can actually know the mind of the One who created us and all things? That's where the freedom is! But how do we quiet the noise around us and within us enough to hear the Spirit's voice? We read scripture. We practice meditation. We invest in a Bible study with a small group of friends. It's through these activities and practices that the Spirit leads us back to our truest selves created in God's image.

Finally, we awaken to the Spirit within us...by trusting the Spirit to create peace within us.

The peace that comes from the Spirit isn't connected to our circumstances or a lack of conflict in our lives, but a deep sense that we are not alone, and that in the end God has us, we have the Spirit, and that's enough. The one who has breathed life into us at the beginning of our lives is still breathing new life into us each moment in order to bring new life to others around us. Each one of us bears the image of God on the outside and has the Spirit of God with us on the inside.

Friends, as we move through these next several weeks during Lent, we're going to walk through the ways that we awaken to the work of the Spirit within us. As you go into this week, I want you to have some handles, some specific ways of entering into some

daily practices that will heighten your awareness of the movement of the Spirit that is dwelling in you.

The link that you see on the screen will take you to the Five-Day Devotional that we create each week for you. [Visit popmn.org/downloads] This week you'll find some directions for practicing a Breath Prayer. I'll teach you how to use a specific, repeated, short sentence that you can use to help focus on the Spirit's presence any time of day or night. These are designed to help you awaken to the Spirit's presence within you. I know you'll find it to be really helpful.