

Lessons on Breathing

John 11:1-45

Brett Webb-Mitchell

The Divinity School, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina

When I was a young boy, my cousins taught me a lifesaving practice that I took very seriously, because it literally concerned matters of life and death...or more honestly, *my* life and death. Every time we would go past a cemetery in a car, they told me I had to hold my breath for the entire period of time in front of the cemetery, or I might die earlier than I was supposed to die. Of course this had to be done in a car, or I would probably die from not breathing as I walked or ran by the cemetery. After being taught this practice, holding one's breath became the only thing that mattered when driving by a cemetery. And I preferred speeding by it, whether I was on the highway or not, for I feared that the dead might rise and get us to join them as unwilling participants.

At this point, you may think that I've watched one too many horror flicks on television. I'll grant you that I was one who closed his eyes just enough to blink them if the scene was gory, but open enough to be scared for the thrill, the adrenalin rush pumped into my life for the time being. Mummies with hanging white bandages from the days of Pharaoh staggering out of graveyards; gnarled, skeleton-like hands suddenly coming out of the dirty grave on a stormy night; and the well-dressed vampires in Gucci loafers, whose caskets were satin bedrooms during daylight. These are but some of the visions we have around death and graveyards. We do so out of necessity, for in order to survive the uncertainty of death, we narrate that which is unknown about death with such lurid tales; to fill in the blanks, if you will.

Cemeteries unnerve us because we don't quite know what to do with death and dying itself. As many times as I have been at the bedside of someone dying, held someone's frail head as the breath of death struggled to be heard once more, or tended to the grieving of someone whose friend or family member has just died, I still find it awkward to find the right words, the proper posture, the significant gesture to answer all the questions we have about dying and death. Even though we spend forty days and nights called "Lent" in the Christian church, preparing ourselves for the death of Jesus upon the cruelty of the cross, we can, if we want, deny it for the entire season. With ashes placed on the forehead on Ash Wednesday, we can run quickly to the bathroom and wash it off, trying to forget the words, "dust to dust, ashes to ashes...and to dust you shall return." Perhaps, we think, living on this side of Easter, on this side of hope and promise for eternal life, we can avoid the unavoidable, hide from the matter of death, the unknown and unknowable; perhaps we can dodge the inevitable of our lives.

The reality of this season of Lent, of death and dying, reading Psalm 23 and the wandering with the psalmist through the "valley of the shadow of death," is that we must wander through the intricate maze of feelings and thoughts that haunt us like the eerie atmosphere of a cemetery, meeting the specter-like memories of dear ones departed, in order to begin learning the lessons on the gift of breathing in this life. To embrace the unlimited hope of Easter, we must remember the limitations of this mortal coil we wear. Walking through the graveyard, through the valley full of bones, is

necessary for instructing us in the lessons on breathing from God, the one who gives us the gift of breath, the gift of life.

The absence of breath in a lifeless body reminds Christians quickly of the gift of breath we take so for granted. It is only when watching the newborn breathe, or the ailing family member arduously lumber on for breath that our consciousness is shocked by the gift it is to simply breathe. The Giver of the gift, God, is caught in the act in the second story of creation. We read that the Lord God formed the human being from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the “breath of life; and the creature became a living being” (Gen. 2:7). Clearly the creature was not alive when just formed of dust, of mud, of clay. It was only when the Spirit of God passed into the then-lifeless form that life began to throb within the sinews, the veins, the arteries, the reflexes of human life.

Or consider Ezekiel’s wild ride through the undecorated cemetery of a boneyard. There were shinbones and arm bone, wishbones and collarbones, and skulls enough to keep any paleontologist busy for the rest of his or her life. Then the Lord spoke to Ezekiel, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.” Suddenly, there was a rattling and clicking like the tide going out over a million pebbles on the beach as the bones started snapping back together. Then Ezekiel was told to prophesy again: “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” And with that, the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. The Lord God told Ezekiel to tell these bones, the whole house of Israel, that God is bringing them back to the land of Israel, putting his spirit within them, and they shall live, and will be on their own soil, and they shall know that the Lord has spoken and will act.

Ezekiel’s story reminds us amid moments of discouragement as God’s people that the powerful word of God gives new life to his chosen. It is this same gift of the breath of life that is highlighted in the story of Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha and friend of Jesus. They thought him dead, and were upset at Jesus for not being closer to Bethany when their brother, his friend, died. When hearing of the news of his death, Jesus broke down himself, the first and only time this is recorded of him in the New Testament. No pious clichés about what a merciful release it was for him and his family and friends. Jesus wept.

Then Jesus went to the place where his friend’s body lay, and Jesus prayed, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” Jesus then called out to his brother, and the man, once dead, was given the power of life. For the one who alone can raise us from sin to grace miraculously resuscitates Lazarus back to life again.

These are the lessons on breathing that God has given his chosen followers, with the bones given life in front of Ezekiel’s eyes, and the dead Lazarus joining us again, one more time, for the party of mortal life. These are all magnificent classroom-on-earth demonstrations. God himself, in the person of Jesus Christ, was dependent upon this gift of breath. When the Word of God became flesh, God affirmed the physical and fleshly by taking upon himself the uniform, and was unashamed to wear it. Be amazed that the breath of life is a gift that God has given his people, with hopes that we will rejoice with abandon as we watch the newborn breathe effortlessly. Marvel

as the Christ, in the face of the hungry and the homeless, gains strength from the food and shelter our missionary endeavors hope to assure in an age of despair. Be encouraged as we faithfully travel along the road of life, to death, knowing that while physical death is our common lot, the gift of faith in Jesus Christ will bring us all back to life in the resurrection of the dead. For beyond the undecorated cemetery of Ezekiel's boneyard, and Lazarus's temporary tomb, God waits for us in glory, with the communion of saints who are truly alive to what, and who, is real.