

I Can't Breathe! We Can't Breathe!

Genesis 1:1-2 Genesis 2: 1-7 Job 33:1-4 Ezekiel 36:7-10 John 20:19-22

I Can't Breathe! We Can't Breathe!

Science & many indigenous peoples spiritualities agree Earth is a living organism.

Like other living organisms, living parts of the organism are interconnected.

Living things develop in relationship with one another & in response to each other.

The earth's rock is a response to the prior cooling of the earth's creative, hot gases.

Fertile soil across the Midwest is a response to the rock-crushing-and-leveling movement of glaciers across previously rough, stony landscapes.

Mountain ranges are a response to the prior shifts of tectonic plates moving deep underneath the earth's surface.

Trees are a way for the earth to store carbon.

Eyes are a response to the prior existence light!

The skeleton is animal life's response to migrating from water and needing to support themselves on land.

Lungs are a response to the prior existence of an oxygenated atmosphere.

Breathing is the work the lungs do in order for animals and humans to live and grow, move about and flourish.

The people of the Bible—**who understood faithfulness to be a response to the prior existence of God**—recognized breathing as an essential process of life and called it "*Ruach*".

Ruach is Breath!

Ruach is Wind!

Moving Air!

Spirit!

They saw “Ruach” as the powerful, creative SOURCE of life, so they WROTE, in the Book of Genesis, that the Spirit—the *Ruach*— was moving across the face of the waters of Creation.

In the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, it is written "*Behold, my Servant whom I uphold...I have put my **Ruach** upon him.*" (Isaiah 42:1)

Jesus said: *The Ruach of YHVH (Yahweh) is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.....to release the oppressed,* (Luke 4:17-18a; Isa 61:1)

Ruach! Breath!

Breathe on me, breath of God...fill me with life anew!

Isn't this what we all desperately need today?

This concept of *Ruach/Breath* is connected to our two current powerful, puzzling painful, predicaments.

Isn't there a spiritual connection between George Floyd's last words "I can't breathe." & the life & death struggle of people who are hospitalized with Covid-19.

I can't breathe!—under inequality!

They can't breathe! —under Covid!

This unfortunate spiritual connection radiates outward like a towering tidal wave, multiplying in its crushing impact on all of us.

We can't breathe!—! because of twin pandemics of Covid-19 and the Chokehold which anti-blackness has **fastened** around the necks of African Americans in our nation.

How do we become allies in taking this chokehold off their necks?

How do we take this chokehold off all our necks?

Where is the way—to breathing again?

Let's find a way by focusing 1st on public health, then public safety, the chokehold and crime.

1st—Public health! It seems obvious at this point what public health means!

Wear a mask. Wash your hands regularly.

Don't congregate close together indoors in bars and restaurants.
Or in other indoor crowds.

People shouldn't gather in a celebratory way without wearing masks.

Until cases are trending downward—and there is less possible exposure to the virus, sending children to in-person schools or youth to in-person universities is a **big risk**. I was talking with one of my daughters about her school age children and the plan in her school district. She said they are talking about having in person school, **but**, she noted, the people talking about it are meeting by ZOOM. Hmmmhhh....

Do you really want to sign up for what NYU business school professor Scott Galloway calls “the consensual hallucination”?

Many of us are already practicing Covid public health. I suspect you are.

But if you believe that public health will be achieved only when the leaders of the federal government and your state government and your city government **act in concert and commit** to what science is observing—then you need to change who those leaders are so that message can get through and get loud.

Say it loud for the people at the back!

Dr. David Ho is an eminent physician and researcher at Columbia University and one of the long time leading scientists in the fight against the AIDS pandemic.

In March, on national television, he presented two charts.

One chart showed what would happen if states and cities decided on their own **when and how** to introduce social distancing and masks.

The sequential method.

NY does it on, say, March 18. Missouri on April 4. Arizona on April 30.
And so on.....

On that chart, the pandemic goes on and on and on and on.....

The other chart, which Dr. Ho specifically recommended, showed what would happen if everyone did it all at once.

The simultaneous method.

On that chart, the pandemic slows to a near stop, at least a very low, flat curve within a few months.

Under our current national leadership and many state government leaders, we chose the sequential method. And sometimes no method at all.

Result? The pandemic goes on and on and on and on....

Good news though from Dr. Ho!

Even though we have missed the bus, and tens of thousands have tragically, sadly died, it is never too late to shift gears and—

Re—engage the simultaneous method.

Still it seems that to achieve that, we must wait for elections—and in the meantime—protect ourselves and each other and everyone you can as very best we can.

You will be voting for public health and your personal health this fall.

You are voting for your life—and your family's life.

Your friends. Your neighbors' lives.

We can't breathe!

So let's find the way to breathe!

Ruach!—Find the moving air!

Bob Seger sang a great song about running **against** the wind.

But now, let's start running with the wind!

Breathe on me, breath of God! Fill me with life anew!....(pause)

Now to Public safety!

“I can't breathe!”

“I can't....breathe!”

How many times are we going to fall for Law and Order?

Every time America has a big decision to make—we fall for Law and Order.

Consider the perspective of former federal prosecutor, Georgetown University law professor, African American author—Paul Butler—on law and order's role in all elections in the past 50 plus years.

Alert!—This is a non-partisan recap:

Starting with Richard Nixon's official “Law and Order campaign in '68—law and order for everyone but himself—

To Jimmy Carter-yes, the blessed man, Jimmy Carter speaking out against forced racial integration as he ran for president—

Ronald Reagan told us over and over again they he would make sure no more black women were going to be driving their welfare Cadillacs, as he called them.

Bush 1 and Willie Horton—Bush had people thinking ex-prisoner Willie Horton was going to be his opponent's Vice President—

Clinton and Sister Souljah—Remember? And then Clinton left the campaign trail to oversee the execution of a black man who was so mentally disabled that at his last meal, he turned down the pecan pie because, he said he was “saving it for later”.

And even Barack Obama in his first campaign felt it necessary to mock “gang bangers”, saying they are so lazy they ask, “Why do I gotta do it? Why can’t Pookie do it?”

And then Trump, talking about the bad hombres, the thugs, calling for the execution of the Central Park 5, who were found innocent.

It’s The Law and Order magic trick!

Only— there is no rabbit in the hat!

How many elections does it take for an American to learn that Law and Order is an election season magic trick?

It’s like hiring a few soldiers for six months to cover up a war we are not winning.

Let me share with you some realities—about the real **absence of public safety** that many people feel.

My first pastorate was in Berkeley, Missouri, right next to Ferguson, which we all know about now because of Michael Brown and the uprising that took place there in 2014.

In demographics, Berkeley in the 1980’s was similar to Ferguson today, about 70% black and brown, 30% white.

There are about 21,000 people in Ferguson.

But in a single year—33,000 arrests.

Did you hear that?

12,000 more arrests than there are people.

The U.S. Dept of Justice investigated and found that the majority of arrests are for unpaid traffic tickets and heinous crimes like “manner of walking in the roadway” and “tall grass and weeds”.

Ferguson police charged a man named “Michael” with making a false declaration because he told them his name was “Mike”. He was playing basketball and went to sit in his car to cool off. For no reason that the US Justice Dept. could determine, they accused “Mike” of being a pedophile. When he declined to have his car searched, they arrested him at gunpoint and charged him with 7 minor offenses including not wearing a seat belt—in a parked car.

A woman called Ferguson police to report being assaulted by her boyfriend. The man was gone when police arrived. The police looked around, determined it was the boyfriend’s home and the woman wasn’t on the home’s occupancy permit. They arrested her for “permit violation” and took her to jail.

These are US Justice Department findings, shared by Paul Butler, who himself prosecuted drug cases, gun cases and public corruption.

I double dog dare you to read his book CHOKEHOLD, and not become indignant enough to want to become part of the change we are now experiencing. Paul Butler wrote CHOKEHOLD 3 years before George Floyd was killed in Minneapolis. He uses the term “chokehold” as a policing term, but more as a metaphor for the way in which our culture dominates and exploits African Americans, and especially black men.

After studying CHOKEHOLD and another book WHITE FRAGILITY, with another pastor—and preparing for an anti-racism audit in the Presbyterian Church in this area, **I’ve started using the term anti-blackness** more often than racism.

Why? Because I think racism is mostly seen as personal prejudice and hate, which most of us, white people, will deny. I understand that. I have done so myself.

Whereas anti-blackness suggests a systematic mind-set and structure of reality that dominates our culture whether we feel we personally participate in it or not.

And after working with people of color in St. Louis and Kansas City, I have come to understand that while anti-blackness reaches a boiling hot temperature in the relations between police and black and brown people, it is still Hot! Hot! Hot!—in every part of our world due to the original sin and ongoing sin of slavery.

This week, I watched a short phone video of a white man approaching the teenage daughters of an African American woman I know, an attorney in Portland. The girls were taking out the trash from their home. The man approaches them and begins demanding to know what they are doing there and why they are going through the trash. They were smart, articulate and stood their ground. And finally realizing that they lived there and were dumping their own trash, the man retreated.
.....Aaaahhhh!!!!

If I could reach inside my brain and psyche and your brain and psyche and the brain and psyche of every white person in this nation and remove anti-blackness as if by some process of emergency room spiritual surgery—I would do it.

But I can't.

You have to do it.

We need to do it.

Because it is preventing us from breathing.

It is an obstruction by whose cancerous power, “We can't breathe!”

Its logical consequence is an endless line of George Floyd's pleading, “I can't breathe.”

Breonna Taylor—“You shot me. Eight times. I can't live.”

According to a lawsuit filed by her family, her killing was the result of a botched drug-warrant execution. No drugs were found; the warrant in question targeted another person, who lived miles away and had already been detained by the time police entered Taylor's home.

Who do we go to about that?

The DA? The governor? The president?—will he send in federal troops to solve her murder?

The mayor? The police chief? The lawmakers?—God—Take it to the Lord—Jesus—in prayer!—

Let's take it to all of the above!

We have to do it.

Because we can't breathe!

We could end here but for one more thought about the spirituality of all this.

In the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus talked about the Ruach of God being upon him—then commented on it, he really got under the skin of some of his listeners.

He told them that God doesn't play favorites, and that if they, the insiders don't change, God's going to take the side of the outsiders and the outliers.

This, of course, made his listeners angry, and they threatened to take Jesus outside and throw him off a cliff.

Only somehow, in the melee, he managed to get away.

He passed through them! walked away unharmed!

Don't let him walk away from your life.

We cannot be silent.

Instead, say it loud for the people in back—whether to end anti-blackness or the uninformed way this pandemic is being handled—you are making an affirmation of faithfulness.

Don't let Jesus walk away!

Instead, let's all start walking the talk.

Pick up your cross!

Follow Jesus before he gets too far away!

Amen.

Rev. Scott Myers
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