

## “A Holy Baptism by the Breath of Heaven”

### Mark 1: 1-8

As I shared last week, the Hebrew word “Ruach” means breath, wind, or spirit. And when it is applied to God, it indicates God’s creative activity or active power. So as an aspect of our Advent journey together, I am inviting everyone to do some exchanging of words in our Scripture each week to tie in our theme for Advent. Each week, every time we see the phrase “Holy Spirit”, we will replace it with the phrase, “Breath of Heaven” and see what new meanings and insights this practices brings to us this season.

So I invite you to hear these words with the changes made:

"The good news of Jesus Christ—the Message!—begins here, following to the letter the scroll of the prophet Isaiah.

Watch closely: I’m sending my preacher ahead of you; He’ll make the road smooth for you. Thunder in the desert! Prepare for God’s arrival! Make the road smooth and straight!

John the Baptizer appeared in the wild, preaching a baptism of life-change that leads to forgiveness of sins. People thronged to him from Judea and Jerusalem and, as they confessed their sins, were baptized by him in the Jordan River into a changed life. John wore a camel-hair habit, tied at the waist with a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild field honey. As he preached he said, “The real action comes next: The star in this drama, to whom I’m a mere stagehand, will change your life. I’m baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. His baptism—a holy baptism by the Breath of Heaven, God's creative power—will change you from the inside out.”

There has been one particular phrase from this text that has stayed with me all week-“The Breath of Heaven will change you from the inside out”.

At first, this phrase stood out to me because it bugged me so much. I'm not a firm believer in the fact that we can't change people into the people we think they should be nor should we change who we are just to fit into other people's mold of what is acceptable, just to get people's approval. So as I kept thinking about this phrase, "the Breath of Heaven will change you from the inside out", I kept hitting a proverbial wall each and every time my mind started traveling in this type of direction, in a direction that calls us to change who we are just to fit in or get approval. I kept wondering is that what God is asking us to do in this passage? Change who we are just so that God will accept us? Change who we are just so God will approve of us?

Well, I didn't like where this train of thought was leading simply for the fact, that was not the God that I had experienced or have known in my own life and I bit it is safe to say that is not the type of God that all of us have experienced as well. We all know that one of the greatest gifts that God has ever given to us is the knowledge and the understanding that God loves us more than we could ever imagine. We know deep in our hearts and we celebrate the understanding that we all have that God loves us no matter what. No matter what we do, God's love is there for us.

So surely, I had to be wrong about exactly what this passage was saying. I must be wrong about the type of change that text is talking about, about this transformation from the inside out that comes from the Breath of Heaven.

There had to be something more going on in this text.

And that something more came to me in the oddest of places- a YouTube Video. We all know what type of YouTube videos circulate around the internet-the babies dancing to Beyonce's Single Ladies or flash mobs of choirs singing the Halleluiah chorus at the mall food court.

Well, when I googled the phrase, "transformation inside out", up popped a YouTube video that was simply titled: "Homeless Veteran Time-lapse Transformation". In what is about a 3 minute video, I watched a man named Jim Wolf who was a homeless vet transformed into a new person. Jim gets a new hair cut, a beard trim, a little color to hide the gray and the final piece is a new clean suit. By the end of these 3 minutes, Jim Wolf is transformed from looking like a homeless vet, from looking like someone that we would probably all avoid on the streets to looking like a clean cut CEO, transformed into looking like someone we all know, someone we would want to know, transformed into someone that we would respect and welcome as our friend.

Now I will tell you that my cynical side came out a bit while watching this video. My initial reaction as I was watching this transformation was "Seriously, do

these do-gooders really think just a hair cut and a new suit will change everything for this man? If that's all it takes to change someone's life, then we've been going about the war on poverty all wrong! Let's just give everyone a haircut and clean clothing! Seriously, what are the people who put this video together, who transformed this man physically thinking?"

See I do have a cynical side and yes, I will admit it comes out more often than I like. And usually when that cynical side comes out, God has a lesson for me.

And that lesson came in the last few seconds of the video. They blew me away. I really expected the video to end with something like, "Now after the makeover, we gave Jim \$50 and sent him on his way. Isn't God great?" I really expected the video to end with Jim walking out the door while the supposed do-gooders all patted themselves on the back because they believed that they made a difference, that they had changed this man's life."

But that's not how the video ends. The video ends with Jim Wolf looking in the mirror and crying. He gets up and hugs all the hair dressers and workers. And then the screen goes black with the words flashed across it that said, "Jim was now going to AA meetings and had found suitable housing once again."

In that 3 minute transformation, where Jim Wolf is transformed from looking like a homeless vet to looking like a CEO, I learned exactly how the Breath of Heaven changes us from the inside out.

Because it is not a physical change. It is a change that reconnects us to the Breath of Heaven inside ourselves. It is a change that reminds us who we are and whose we are. It is a transformation that reconnects us with the God of love and grace that resides within all of us.

Let me explain: In this video, it wasn't just about the physical changes that Jim experienced. "It was about the process that brought back the man underneath the condition. Jim could now look in the mirror and not see someone who was homeless, someone without a job, someone he didn't even recognize. Now Jim could look in the mirror with his own eyes and see the person he once was."

The article attached to the video says it best:

"There is no silver bullet to homelessness or the addictions and situations that lead to it. A clean haircut and new suit will not solve everything, but it is a mistake to undervalue what can be done for people and their self-confidence through this simple act. We are in many cases our own worst enemies and what we see in the mirror is not just a reflection of what we look like, but how we feel. After such a long time for someone in his shoes, seeing himself in the mirror looking like a high-paid executive had to be a monumental shift, a reminder of what he is capable of being."

For me in theological terms, that means at that point looking in the mirror, Jim was able to see the child of God he was and the person that God created and hoped he would be.

And as I looked at that phrase once more, “The Breath of Heaven will change you inside out” I knew that type of transformation, a transformation that invites us to see who we are and whose we are, a transformation that invites us to see the person that God created us and calls us to be, is exactly what John the Baptist was talking about that day beside the river Jordan.

What I love about this text is that John the Baptist knew the people were waiting for something. He knew the people were searching for something. The people were waiting and watching for the one called Emmanuel, “God with us” to come once more. And they thought that they found that something more, that “God with us” in John the Baptist.

And he could have easily said, “I’m the person you have all been waiting for to come along.” He could have easily said, “You don’t need to look any farther. God sent me.” John the Baptist could have easily done all that and basked in the glory of being the one but he didn’t. He simply says, “The best is yet to come! The one who is coming is going to do so much more than I ever could. And it will certainly be worth the wait”

Because John knew something the people back then and what we as people of faith have forgotten as well. There is our time and there is God’s time. We can’t simply make someone into the Son of God simply because we want him to be that for us.

John knew all that. He knew he wasn't the Son of God and that something better was coming along and all he could do was prepare the way. All he could do was offer a gift that would help the people prepare their hearts for God's Spirit, for God's creative activity to come once more and be among the people.

And he does this by offering the act of baptism. John knew that the waters of baptism were a physical act that would begin the process of reclaiming the person underneath the condition, reclaiming the person under all that stuff that the world had put on that person that he or she could no longer recognize themselves as a child of God. John knew that the waters of baptism would wash away the old and prepare the person for the Kingdom life but there was one who was to come that would continue the process of completely remaking that person inside and out, reconnecting that person with the Spirit of God that resides within all of us.

What John remembered and we have all forgot is that from the very beginning God has wanted to be in relationship with the people of God, going as far as to create us in God's image, going as far as to breathe life into all of us, going as far as to give all us a piece of God's creative power to reside in us to remind us who we are and whose we are.

And somewhere along the way, we lost that connection. The world has piled so much upon us: expectations of who we should be, expectations of what we should look like, expectations of what it means to be successful, expectations of

what it means to be accepted. Layer upon layer of stuff, layer upon layer of dirt, layer upon layer of crap. And now through the waters of baptism, we are offered a chance to change physically, to wash away the dirt and grime and reclaim, reconnect to that light, to that person we are all capable of being, to reconnect and reclaim the potential of becoming the person God created us and calls us to be.

But this takes hard work. It means letting go of some of our comfortable expectations. It means that we might have to be remade from the inside out.

You see, if all it took to make us God's people, was the act of having water poured over our heads, then everybody would do that and the world would be in better shape. We would come up out of the water, pat ourselves on the back, and life would be good with nothing more expected from us. Life would be good. Life would be comfortable. Life would be easy.

But as we all know. Change is hard. Transformation is difficult. And it requires hard work. Being transformed into the people of God is not just a physical change. It is not a cosmetic change that fixes our hair, fixes our bodies, or shapes into what a perfect "Person of God" should look like.

The transformation of the Breath of Heaven is a spiritual change. It is a change of heart. It is a change of mind. It is a change of how we view our relationships with one another as brothers and sisters. It is the type of change that doesn't make us accepted or give us people's approval. In fact, just the opposite is

true. The transformation of the Breath of Heaven, of God's creative activity, makes us outcasts because we can no longer cooperate with the systems and practices that violate God's justice, that prevent God's compassion from happening, that stop God's grace from flowing to all of God's people.

John knew that this physical act of change was just the beginning. It would wash away the grime of the world and allow us to begin the process of making the paths straight and laying mountains low for all of God's children. John knew that we as the people of God reconnected and reclaimed our connection to the God within us, our whole world would be changed. Because it would change our values, change our ethics, change our very way of being and interacting with one another.

Because now we would understand that we are part of a bigger reality, a new reality, a kingdom reality. We were becoming the person God created us and calls us to be.

The sad fact is that we have forgotten who we are and whose we are because all we are doing is waiting and watching for God to with us once more. The reality of it is God never left us. God has been with us all along. God is with us and God is waiting for us to reconnect and reclaim the God within us once more.

The challenge for us as the people of God is to not expect God to do all the hard work alone. God gave us a part of Godself for a reason. God breathed the

Breath of Heaven in us for a reason. God put inside all of us a piece of God's creative activity for a reason. And now is the time to begin the process of reconnecting and reclaiming that piece as the people of God. Now is the time for us to allow the Breath of Heaven to begin transforming us inside out so that we can become the people God created us to be, calls us to be so that this world will know that God never left. God is with us. God is within us.

We have the power to transform our world. God is with us. God is within us. The Kingdom of God is here. If we only have the courage to reconnect with the Breath of Heaven that resides in all us.

May we all be baptized by God's creative power once more and become the people that God created us to be. Amen.