If ever there was a perfect text for a Sunday in this time, it must be this. *When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear ...*

The early church and the church today have one thing in common at least: we are simply the church, don’t you know?! Human beings. And when our world is turned upside down, we tend to go into lockdown. Fear takes our breath away. And if there’s one thing we need to live, it’s breath.

We’re living though a trying time unlike anything we’ve experienced in our lifetimes. The alterations in daily life are one thing. Seniors who are used to being alone are now fighting loneliness, too. Parents who are used to sending their kids off to school and then going off to work are now finding their whole world cramped into the confines of their apartments or houses. Essential workers go to work and come home worried that they have been exposed. The most harmonious families are stressed in ways that disturb the peace. Those who struggle with mental health and those whose family life is fragile or dangerous are living on the brink. Anxiety and feelings of hopelessness can intensify in these circumstances.

Add to that the disappointment of once-in-a-lifetime events for young people being canceled or reprogrammed with social distancing. Wilshire’s Youth Choir tour was canceled this week. Graduations are postponed. Sports teams and other activities are on hold.

It all mounts up as the days mount up, with no end in sight. Living in confined spaces for extended periods can make it hard to breathe in more than one way.

The first and most dangerous way, of course, is when someone gets the coronavirus itself. It literally takes your breath away.

COVID-19 attacks the respiratory system, making it hard to breathe on your own. And for many with compromised immune systems, the virus is
fatal, robbing them of breath, and taking their life. So far, this coronavirus has taken 144,000 lives worldwide and 110 here in North Texas.

Tommy Shapard is a Baptist music minister in Jacksonville, Florida, and a friend of our church. His mother, Carolyn was our minister to adults some years ago before she and her husband Charlie retired to Fort Worth. Tommy contracted the virus a few weeks ago and thank God has now recovered. Here’s how he described it: My first symptom was I would breathe in and my throat and esophagus would be cold, and if I coughed that coldness would be there, too. I would try to use my asthma inhalers and my maintenance inhaler, and I couldn’t breathe all the way in because it hurt so badly in my throat and in my esophagus. I had shortness of breath just getting out of bed to walk to the sink. …

Tommy was one of the lucky ones who recovered due to the heroic efforts of doctors like Amy Wilson and nurses like Claire Tommy. These are the first-responder heroes in this crisis, just as firefighters were during the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks nearly two decades ago. By the way, more than 9,000 hospital workers have now contracted the virus, and many have died while caring for others.

Tommy talked about his caregivers: When they took me upstairs to the ICU, there was this team of nurses, doctors and technicians. It was like my own pit crew. They were just beaming with energy and grace and they greeted me with my name: ‘Tommy, we’ve got this. You’re good.’ They restored my lungs and saved me from going on that ventilator.¹

Beautiful. What a relief. Everyone has not been so lucky.

But about that word ventilator … We’ve been hearing a lot about the shortage of them around the country. Ventilators are machines that mechanically force oxygen into the lungs to improve respiration. They are easily confused for respirators, which technically protect against the respiratory system being infected. A facemask, for

¹ https://baptistnews.com/article/a-little-ptsd-results-from-baptist-ministers-crisis, just as firefighters were during the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks nearly two decades ago. By the way, more than 9,000 hospital workers have now contracted the virus, and many have died while caring for others.
instance, is a respirator. But popularly, we use the language of respiration to talk about our capacity to breathe.

And spiritually, this is what we all need in times like these when we are infected with fear and locked behind closed doors. We need the breath of life that not only allows to keep on living in the world but fills us with God’s peace and the confidence that we will live eternally.

In Roman mythology, Mezentius was a cruel Etruscan king who took pleasure in torturing his enemies. He would take living prisoners and bind them to the recent dead. The noxious gases emitting from the mouth of the dead would fill the lungs of the living with enough toxins to kill them, too. In Virgil’s *Aeneid*, he lyrically describes the act: *The living and the dead at his command/ Were coupled, face to face, and hand to hand./ Till, chok’d with stench, in loath’d embrace tied,/ The ling’ring wretches pin’d away and died.*

Whether by such deliberate cruelty, by unhappy contagion of the coronavirus, by the breathtaking changes around us and to us that cause us fear or worry, or simply by living long enough that our bodies fail us and the breath of life slips away—one way or another, if all we have to rely on is our own respiratory powers, we die eventually. We need intervention. We need respiration. We need the breath of eternal life breathed into our souls. If this time teaches us anything, it’s that we need grace. We cannot save ourselves.

And this is the good news we preach and live. The resurrected Christ seeks us and finds us wherever we are, even when we are locked behind closed doors out of fear and worry. And when he finds us, when he comes to us—and he finds us all and comes to each one of us—he knows what we need. Instead of being tied to the rotting corpse of this world, we are united to the ever-living Lord of the new creation. Christ breathes fresh life into us.

And no one is left out. Thomas wasn’t there that Easter night when Jesus found the other disciples in that locked room. But when Thomas was with them the next week, Jesus

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2 Book VIII.
returned because he knew what
Thomas needed, too. Thomas
thought he needed to touch
Jesus, to see his wounds for
himself. What he really needed
was just to have his own
personal encounter with Jesus.

We see here that Jesus respects
our individual circumstances
and gives each of what we need
to believe. He doesn’t leave
anyone out, including you.

God breathing life into us is only
half the story, though. John
Wesley talked about Jesus
breathing on the disciples and
putting God’s breath into them
as the first act of salvation. The
second is our breathing that life
on others through good works.

Salvation, he believed, is at heart
a form of breathing or
respiration. The means of grace
are inhaled, and good works are
exhaled. If we try to get by in life
by only breathing in grace, what
happens? How long can you hold
your breath? After a while you
pass out. Breathing that only
takes in but doesn’t give out is
respiration that leads to
expiration.

Then there are those who want
large draughts of divine grace,
and inhale deeply of God’s grace,
but who don’t want to let out it
out though good works. If you
take deep inhalations and
shallow exhalations, what
happens? You hyperventilate;
and some Christians are
hyperventilating on the Holy
Spirit.³

Jesus commissioned the
breathed-on disciples to breathe
on others. He says: If you forgive
the sins of any, they are forgiven
them; if you retain the sins of any,
they are retained.

This verse has been used in
Christian history in abusive
ways. Some think Jesus is giving
authority to the Church to decide
whose sins may be forgiven and
whose won’t be. This is the sort
of thing that led to the
Protestant Reformation. Popes
would threaten to retain the sins
of paupers and princes alike in
order to exercise control over
them. But Protestants have often
fallen into the same trap of
claiming false spiritual authority
over other human beings.

We need to look at the context.
Jesus has just come into a room
filled with his closest friends

³ https://sermons.com/sermon/let-it-
breathe/1361912
who nearly to a man had denied him or fled from him in his hour of need. The kiss of peace with the breath of life was his gift of unexpected forgiveness. Now he tells them to go and do the same for others. The whole force of these words is toward forgiving, not withholding forgiveness. The idea of withholding forgiveness after they have been forgiven is unthinkable in this new world the risen Christ is bringing about. And the horror of their failing to forgive is that people will continue to be plagued by their sins instead of knowing the wondrous grace of God.

Last Sunday, Rabbi Nancy Kasten, Imam Omar Suleiman and I talked to Dallas County Judge Clay Jenkins on our Faith Commons program. (You can tune in at 12:12 PM again today.) Clay made the comment that the faith community is also among our first responders in this time of crisis, providing comfort and hope. This is our mission.

We have God’s peace in the midst this current time, friends. And while we can’t pass that peace with a kiss that breathes on others literally, we can show the world what God’s peace looks like when we announce forgiveness to any and all in Jesus’ name.

Respiration brings restoration. We help people breathe again, spiritually. In this way, too, we are critical first responders. Amen.