

Dear People of University Lutheran Church,

On Tuesday night, I was sitting at our kitchen table writing and listening to the deep, rhythmic breathing of my mother-in-law, Alice. If I hadn't known she was on hospice and dying of cancer, I would have said she was simply enjoying a deep sleep. However, in the days since, reality has set in and her breathing has changed dramatically. Each day her breathing has become shallower and less rhythmic. The apnea, as it is called, long periods between one breath and another, is growing. Each time that happens we cannot help but wonder if this just might be her last breath.

These words from Genesis 2:7 about breath have always struck me, "The LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being." If you read this as I do, you will note that what makes Adam alive is the breath of God. Without God's breath, Adam, Alice, you and me, are just dust of the ground. With God's breath we are alive and full of life. I also take this to mean the breath you are enjoying right now is evidence the Lord God is with you and sustaining your life, even now as you are reading this.

As I understand it, the coronavirus (Covid-19) loves human lung tissue. In addition to giving us a sore throat and cough, it can make breathing extremely difficult and painful. In other words, it seeks to work creation backwards, to remove the breath of God from our bodies and return us to dust. Sadly, as I am writing this article, the virus has done this 58,382 times in the world. Even as I continue to listen to my mother-in-law breathe, listening as her breathing becomes more erratic, I am reminded there are a lot of people with Covid-19 who are struggling to breathe in hospitals across the world.

Years ago, I was part of a prayer group that included Janet Hanson, Bonnie Mund, Betty Bloomquist, Deb Bakke, and a few other people as well. Deb Bakke always began her prayers thanking God for breath. Since she struggles with breathing because of a pulmonary disease, this always made perfect sense to me. But really, I think we all should thank the Lord God for breath, and not only because we might have a breathing issue. We should thank the Lord for breath because each breath we take is our assurance that God is with us, sustaining the gift of life the He breathed into us at our birth.

Mark 15:37 says, "With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last." This amazing man who had spent his last three years healing and forgiving, loving and saving people; who had preached tirelessly about the mercy and love of God to a people dominated by a legal and judgmental culture; was nailed to a cross and died. There was an effort by humanity to rid the world of the grace he was proclaiming. When he breathed his last, the religious and governmental authorities thought they were rid of him. In truth, on the third day he would rise, breathe and live again, but this time his life would be without end.

As Christian people, we also understand when we breathe our last and our bodies return to the dust of the ground, that which is really us does not remain here on earth. Instead, we believe at our time of death, when the breath God gave us in the first place returns to God, we go with it. Indeed, the Lord Jesus Christ, whose breath and life were restored to him on the third day, has graciously promised to return for us to bring us to God's heavenly home. In this way, when Alice breathes her last, when you and I breathe our last, our last breath here on earth is transformed to our first breath in heaven.

You are in my prayers,
Pastor Tom