

Genesis 2: 4 -20a  
Jeremiah 17: 5-10  
John 3: 1-8

Breath, Wind, Spirit  
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Years ago, I attended an all-woman Seder at the Roth Center in Hanover. The woman leading it was wonderful: teaching us some chants and traditions that really enriched my understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures. As you may know, the Hebrew tradition has been very mindful of how the name of God is used – hence the third of the 10 commandments, the one against taking God’s name in vain. This is a matter of hubris or pride: even though we might want to talk about God, we do not really know of what or of whom we speak. The divine is a mystery, and humans build very small boxes with their words, and think they have it all settled. To avoid speaking the sacred name with their lips, the writers of the ancient Scriptures began to use the words *elohim* and *adonai*– phrases like The Holy One and The Lord - because the sacred name was never to be spoken. From ancient times until the present day, our Hebrew brothers and sisters would avoid using God’s given name (so to speak) which we read in some translations as Yahweh, in others as Jehovah.

The Seder- leader talked about God’s name. She noted that all the consonants (and Hebrew is only written with consonants) in the precious, unspoken name of God are soft, breathable sounds. So it is possible to speak it and not speak it at the same time: to just breathe that name without vocal chords, in and out. Listen: *Yah-weh*. Try it: *Yah-weh*.

One of the reasons that this was so moving to me was its reverence: the quiet hush of the name. The other was its intimacy: God is as available to us as the breath, the air, the wind. Breathing transcends language. It is the one thing we have all done since we came out of our mothers’ bodies and are still doing now. It is as constant as the beating of the heart. Something like... the presence of God.

Today we read part of the second creation story in Genesis. It is a folk tale full of poetic metaphor. It is always mysterious to me that anyone could read this particular section literally: it says that the first person was created before any plants or animals existed. Rather than being the most recently created, the pinnacle of creation, so to speak, Adam (whose name means “earth”) is formed out of dust in a barren landscape first. He lives when God breathes – remember how that goes: *Yah-weh* –when God breathes into lifeless earth. Adam is alive ...and alone. God then plants a garden, with trees, a tree of life and a tree of knowledge. The lonely man is put to work, tilling it and keeping it. Almost as an afterthought, God says, “It is not good to be alone” and creates all other living creatures and lets Adam name them. Finally, the loneliness problem is solved by the creation of Eve. Last. If there is a pinnacle to creation, she is it. I told you it was a folk tale.

It helps us to remember, while we are thinking about our ancestors, that both Hebrew and Greek have some ambiguity in their words for Spirit. *Ruach* in Hebrew can mean spirit or breath or wind. *Pneuma* in Greek can mean spirit or breath or wind. Built into all our Scriptures is wordplay and uncertainty about the breath of God and the wind of God and the Spirit of God. The physical and the spiritual are linked, even in word choice.

All this talk about God and breathing and creation has me thinking about trees: the trees in the garden of Eden, the trees outside these windows, the trees Jeremiah describes (well-watered and parched), the rainforest trees and the Sequoia forests. Trees breathe too. This is not something our ancestors understood, unless it was an intuitive appreciation of these mysteriously alive, life-giving and silent partners in our world. They could not know, as we do, that rainforests produce 40 percent of the world's oxygen, and that trees actually help manage a destructive carbon footprint. But they knew enough to place the archetypes of two trees – the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil - in the first garden of creation.

It strikes me that this passage from Genesis is not about the beginning of life on earth. It says two important things: Adam and we and all people are “of the earth” - a part of God's creation and not separate from it. And, it says, we are given life by God. As such, the story has more to do with the birth and growth of human awareness: your awareness, my awareness, all peoples' awareness. We are born, we take that first big breath, and we are alone at the center of our universe. Gradually we begin to notice that we share the world with other beings, beings that breathe the same sacred spirit that we do. We care for these plants and trees and animal beings, we name them. We have a need for partners and communities. It is not good for us to be alone. Eventually we will eat of that tree of knowledge, and become responsible for actions of good and evil. Born of earth and the Spirit, with the help of those sacred trees, **eventually** we become human.

The passage from John's Gospel also talks about birth and growth. Once again, it is not a science lesson. Jesus is having a conversation with Nicodemus, a well-educated and well-meaning man. Nicodemus recognizes that Jesus is somehow rooted in the power of God, able to teach and act with special authority. But then Jesus blows his mind by suggesting that actually seeing the Kingdom of God requires a kind of rebirth, being “born from above.” That makes no sense, says Nicodemus, using a bit of hyperbole to say that an old person cannot crawl back into his or her mother. Jesus clarifies: one would need to be born of water and Spirit. Not the waters of the womb, but the waters of baptism. Not a baby's first squall, but a new and different deep first breath of God's Spirit: a truly prayerful and life-changing *Yah-weh* of transformation.

Our theological traditions tell us about the meeting point of Spirit and matter. They call it “sacrament.” Usually it is thought of as “a religious ceremony or act of the Christian Church that is regarded as an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual divine grace.” And so we baptize with the sight of flowing water; we commune through the taste of bread and wine. But I would like to expand a bit on the definition of sacrament as that meeting point. Maybe it is an outward and audible sign, or an outward and sensory sign. Maybe it is the deep breath that reminds us of God's name. Maybe it is the first deep breath of a newborn child. Maybe it is the deeply breathed sigh of gratitude for a loved one's presence. Maybe it is that breath of fresh air in the forest that connects us to the trees, breathing deeply in their turn. In that setting, every tree is the tree of life.

There is another Scripture passage about a tree, which was **not** read earlier. It is from the last chapter of the Book of Revelation, that fantastic, surreal and dream-like vision recorded at the end of the first century. The writer is describing the heavenly city, where God lives, and from which the river of the water of life flows like crystal. And, he writes:

“On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” Here is a new sacrament, a new kind of holiness, a new level of human awareness. Our world has expanded from the narrow and

selfish environment of the infant, to a connection with the larger community, including the plant and animal world, breathing in a vast orchestra of praise. But we have more growth in front of us in our progress, a greater awareness of a greater connection. It is so far beyond us, at the moment, that I hesitate to put it into words – just a distant vision, as is all of Revelation. We are given a glimpse of the healing of the nations: the ultimate sacrament.

Just as our rituals in worship symbolize great truths with small gestures, we start with small steps. We do not expect to become enlightened with a single prayer; we do not expect to build a community with a single handshake; we do not expect to satisfy our longing for connection to Jesus with a small cube of bread; we do not expect to heal the nations with the leaves of one tree. But we grow, as Adam and Eve did, towards enlightenment, community, connection, and peace. Each time we humbly breathe the breath of God, we take in a little bit of that goodness, and are thankful. *Yahweh. Amen.*