

We understand suspended animation and hibernation, where something that appears to be lifeless isn't. We are bombarded daily with news about new robots that look alive but aren't. Our culture argues about when life begins and when it ends. How is one to know? And then there is the problem with things that we try to bury which keep surfacing, and memories that we want to hang onto fade away, as if dead. **So how one to know what is alive and what only appears to be alive? And how do we know that something that appears to be dead, might in fact still have life?**

John tells the story of a religious man named Nicodemus. He was full of life and full of faith – but felt empty. John relates that Nicodemus came at night for a reason. John uses that imagery to reinforce that Nicodemus was “in the dark.” He wasn't just hiding for fear of being caught but trapped in his shadows of confusion and doubt. He knew he was breathing but hoped Jesus might add something more to his living.

How often are we troubled and trapped in the same darkness? We want to do the right things. We want to be loved. We want life to be full. But there is always lurking a fear that maybe there is more. Jesus told Nicodemus, who was righteous, religious, and guided by faith that he needed to be born *in a new way! He needed a breath of fresh air in his lungs and a new spirit to fill his heart.*

Nicodemus was taught that keeping the rules would be enough. Deuteronomy 6:4-9 says: “remember the law, tie it on your forehead, write it on your doors, and wrap it on your arm. And so they took scraps of parchment and wrote a law or commandment and literally nailed them to a doorpost or tied them on their body.

They literally followed the commands but didn't take them to heart. The point always was to make this a part of their living. Ingest it, digest it, live it! Make it part of every day of your life – love God / love neighbor! But they were so intent on following those words literally, they strangled the life out of the law. They did it but didn't always feel it. They knew the right words but weren't always motivated by love!

And so, Nicodemus was in the dark, which we often are as well. In a sense, all want a manual so that we know if we follow the right instructions, we will never fail. We think “Remember the Sabbath” means one hour of worship, when in fact it means rest in God's presence and take time out to let God communicate with and touch you so that your faith and weekly living is empowered and full of God's light!

It is like the difference between plunking notes on a piano or filling those notes with passion and joy! It is like the difference between monotonous recitation of words from a story or watching and listening in Dolby surround sound. When God breathes into our lives, our lives breathe with God!

Jesus told Nicodemus it was time for a NEW BIRTH! A NEW LIFE. The Greek is translated to be “born from above” or “born anew.” Jesus meant he needed to open his heart so that God's breath and love and peace would fill every moment of our lives. Nicodemus didn't get it and asked, “You mean re-enter the womb?” And today some Christians don't get it and say, “you need more baptisms until one finally takes hold.”

This account was John's way of teaching that it is not enough just to keep from sinning or breaking rules, God wants us to understand the motive and love behind the rules and live in a new way that becomes our new normal and natural. If you love God and neighbor, you won't break the rules. If you have a new spirit in your living that is the breath of God, God will guide, strengthen, forgive, and shine through you even when you don't know how or why!

This story follows the story of the wedding of Cana (which is really about God's marriage to us, and the new life and new creation which results from that heavenly relationship.) But if you are still hung up with the "born again thing", remember what would come later as Jesus would suffer and die and be buried in a tomb. Everyone said "He is dead! All hope is lost!" But on Easter morning, the same holy breath that invoked Creation, filled the lungs of that dead earthly body and Jesus sprang from the tomb.

Actually, Nicodemus was right. Everything that has an earthly life must re-enter the womb and be born in a new way. That womb is a tomb, and Jesus' death and resurrection brings the miracle of a new birth! That new breath of faith that fills our lungs brings daylight to darkness, and new life out of old. Our time of hibernation is over forever! Just as Jesus surrendered a heavenly throne for a manger, we now can surrender our living to join Jesus in his foot washing, servant love and celebration of our new lives that will never end.

This moment in Lent offers us the opportunity to catch our breath. Or maybe it is better to say, test our breath. Are we hibernating? Is our breath foul like the brokenness of a sinful world? Are we in the dark? Are we unsure? Jesus wanted Nicodemus and each of us to bury all of the earthly confusion in the womb of Calvary's tomb and allow God's breath of life to *breathe life into your life!* This is the heavenly birth!

Frederick Buechner wrote: *"When you are WITH somebody you love, you have little if any sense of the passage of time, and you also have, in the fullest sense of the phrase, a good time. When you are WITH God, you have something like the same experience. It doesn't mean you have to be thinking about being with God, or feeling religious, or sitting in church, or saying your prayers, though it might mean any or all of these. To say that a person is "with it" is slang for saying that whether he's playing an electric guitar or just watching the clouds roll by, he's so caught up in what he's doing and so totally himself while he's doing it that there's none of him left over to be doing anything else with in the back of his head or out of the corner of his eye. Being "with it" may not be the same as being with God, but it comes close."*¹

Remember when Lazarus was raised and Jesus said, "unbind him and set him free?" That is exactly what we have experienced with this new birth and new life. We are indeed set free! We have been born from above! The death wrappings are gone!

In the womb of earth (Jesus' tomb) God's creative breath would restore what was lost! His Holy Breath fills us with faith, hope and love in the same creative miracle that made the rings of Saturn and enabled crickets to chirp and birds to sing. Our living in faith is all about surrendering to God and allowing his breath to fill our heart and lungs.

And then, even what might appear to be useless and immovable comes to life! This is the miracle of Easter and the love of God of life! In other words, God has breathed his love into us

¹ Frederick Buechner. "Wishful Thinking"

– and it is time for us to exhale that love in daily living.

When a diver goes into the water, he or she must first check their tanks to make sure of what they are breathing. This Gospel is all about the same issue. What are you breathing? What is the life that is keeping you truly alive?

My Mom's simple way of reminding me of how that worked was "remember whose you are!" That is her way of reminding me to breathe what will keep me alive. That takes all the guesswork out of how I am to faithfully live!