

Oregon City United Methodist Church
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Series: Life!

Sermon: Don't Hold Your Breath

Genesis 2:4-7 (NIV)

This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the Lord God made the earth and the heavens.

Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the Lord God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground, but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground. Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

John 20:21-22 (NIV)

Again Jesus said, Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Sermon

One of my children's favorite movies is an oldie, but goodie. Jurassic Park. Which is funny, because it came out around the same time that I was my oldest's age. And if you know the movie, it has a lot to say about trying to control nature, of hubris and pride, and its just fun to watch dinosaurs roam the earth and cause chaos. One of the memorable lines from the movie, is uttered by Jeff Goldblum, who tells the experts that they can't control what they've created. He said, "Life finds a way." Take a listen.

For the past 7 weeks, we had a look at some Grimm Fairy Tales and for our sermon series, INTO THE WOODS. And many of those stories were in fact, pretty grim. In this season of Lent, I want to flip the coin and look at stories that affirm life. Peace. Wholeness. Lent is a time of repentance, fasting and preparation for the coming of Easter. It is a time of self-examination and reflection. In the early church, Lent began as a period of fasting and preparation for baptism by new converts and then became a time of penance by all Christians. Today, Christians focus on relationship with God, growing as disciples and extending ourselves, often choosing to give up something or to volunteer and give of ourselves for others. We had our last in person worship service back on March 8th, the second Sunday of Lent a year ago. We began this Covid journey back in Lent, and here we are in another Lent, and friends, it doesn't feel like we ever left Lent. This is the longest Lent ever. Waiting for the resurrection. Waiting for redemption. Waiting for joy. So, in this series, I want to find the scriptures and stories that affirm life from ash. Joy from despair. Peace from turmoil.

Today, we know that the earth is 4.5 billion years old. The universe is around 14 billion years old, so the earth is relatively new. Over the last century, a few scientists have tried to figure out how the first life might have sprung up. They have even tried to recreate this Genesis moment in their labs: to create brand-new life from scratch. So far nobody has managed it.

The oldest known fossils are around 3.5 billion years old, 14 times the age of the oldest known dinosaurs. But the fossil record may stretch back still further. For instance, a few years ago researchers found what appear to be fossilised microbes dating back 3.7 billion years.

Around then, say the Geologists, the earth had cooled and water began to form, creating the oceans and rain. Even Genesis says that in the Beginning, the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

And the main theory going on now is that along the coastal heated underwater vents a miracle occurred. From this primordial soup came the first organisms. Single cell bodies. Scientists believe they have found what they call LUCA. The Last Universal Common Ancestor. The theory being that all of life came from the beginning, a common thread.

We are all related. We are cousins, theoretically speaking, to all living things. Most living things stayed at the microbiological level as single cell organisms, such as bacteria that make up 99% of all life on the planet. And some went on to be plants, and only a fraction of a fraction of a fraction became animal life.

OK, great lesson. Life finds a way. Isn't church supposed to be opposed to these kinds of teachings? Of course not. Science gives us theories on how this all happened. Theology is supposed to give us theories on why it happened. What is God thinking? What was his plan? Let's look at what happened to Adam, the biblical Last Universal Common Ancestor.

What does my Bible say? "But streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground - the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. STOP. Isn't this a beautiful picture of what may have happened symbolically of life? Out of the dust and water, the wind of God creates a living being. Out of nothing, something. Out of ash and dirt, life. Adam, in Hebrew, means dirt, or Earth, if you want it more appealing.

What is this breath of life? Let's look at wind. In Genesis 1, Ruach Elohim—the Spirit of God—was "hovering over" the deep, dark waters, preparing to bring forth creation. We should picture a powerful wind here, blowing over the raging waves of a mighty ocean, as the waters were for ancient Israel a picture of primordial chaos and disorder.

And this same wind is what went into Adam's nostrils. This wind brings life. Breath.

For everything that we can do at the DNA level, for all of our cloning and tinkering, we still can't create life out of anything - we haven't accomplished that yet. God is in the life giving business. What else did God's wind do? At a crucial moment in Exodus, God's wind pushed back the waters once more. His people were stuck at the edge of the Red Sea in the darkness of night, about to be crushed by Pharaoh's army. But God "swept the sea back by a strong east wind [ruach]" The Bible used the same word as it did at creation. Giving birth to the nation of Israel.

When Jesus rose from the dead—an amazing feat in its own right—and then did something really weird. The resurrected King walked right up to His frightened disciples and "breathed on them" (John 20:22). What is going on in this moment? If I walked up to you and breathed in your face, you'd be like, Dude, what are you doing?! But actually, something powerful is happening here. When Jesus breathes on them, He says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Same word. The breath of life.

This is our story, too; God's wind is for us today. He parts the waters of sin and death and raises us to new life in His Spirit (Rom. 6:4)—the same Spirit Jesus compared to a wind that brings life and direction to His people (John 3:8). At Pentecost, when the Lord sent His Holy Spirit upon the church, the scene is described like this: "And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where [the apostles] were sitting" (Acts 2:2). The wind of God still comes upon His people, and we are filled with His very Spirit.

God takes ash. Dirt. Dust. And God creates life. Space to live.

What's my message today? Life finds a way! God is still breathing. He doesn't hold his breath. If God can take dirt and ash and create life, he can do the same with us.

We are in the longest Lent of our lives. And yet there is resurrection at the end. Does your life feel like ash? Let God breath life into it. Do your relationship feel like ash? Let God breath life into it. From Pandemics to Forest Fires to Ice Storms to Distance learning to rolling blackouts - out of ash comes life, let the breath of God come into your life and give you hope. Give you purpose. Give you meaning. Life finds a way in this crazy huge and wonderful universe. And so will you. Just keep breathing.

And the family of God said, AMEN!

Opening:

Good morning Oregon City UMC! This morning we are opening up at the The Haggart Observatory over at the Clackamas Community College. Harold Haggart, a long-time resident of the Oregon City area was once a professional telescope builder. As part of his life-long interest in astronomy, he constructed a personal observatory (originally called the Oregon Trail Observatory) attached to his residence which housed a sophisticated telescope of his own design and making. It's enclosed inside a dome that he built in the late '40's.

Haggart passed away in 1984, and CCC, through partnerships, became the caretaker of the facility. It is 45 above the ground, so the telescope can see above the tree line here. There really are two structures here, the observatory and the decking to get up to it. They are not connected at all. They have their own supports. The telescope is so fine tuned, that, if people were just walking on the decking, the telescope would shake just enough to make it useless.

Today, at least in non covid times, the Rose City Astronomer Club hosts public viewings through out the year. They have other telescopes set up here as well for visitors. When we can once again gather in groups, come check it out - it is amazing to see God's handiwork in all of creation.

Here are this morning's announcements.

Children's Time:

Hey kids, we are in the beginning of Lent. For us, that began on Wednesday. Some of you were at our Wednesday night's Ash Wednesday Service, but for of you who couldn't make it, here is a look at why we have a service for something called Ash Wednesday.

Prayer:

O God, thank you for the hundreds of odd people who worship with us every weekend in these online services. We are odd, because most folk skip through life without a pause to reflect on you. We are odd, for we look out for our fellow pilgrim on life's journey. We are odd because we take the time to feed the hungry. Care for the sick. Reach out to the lost. We are odd because we forgive and forget. Turn the other cheek. Love our enemies. I mean, Who does that? Lead us to be like Christ in how we relate to each other and the people of our community. We want our church to be a positive presence in this community. We also pray for those who are traveling, those who are ill, and those who might be feeling disconnected from others. We give thanks for the front line folk who helped restore power and services after our ice storm. Our hearts and thoughts are with those in other parts of the country facing cold and blackouts. Let these storms pass quickly.. Thank you for your tie that binds us together in Christian love.

With one voice, we join now in praying together: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us

our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Offertory:

Welcome to the Offering, our chance to give back. As United Methodists, we support many ministries, within the church, outside the church, at home and abroad. With the decimation of many of our trees in our city this past weekend, even here at church, let's give pause for a moment to thank those who help keep our grounds tidy and beautiful. We have a landscape fund at church, named after Harold Black who cared for the property once upon a time and donated the starter funds to keep our property kept up. Today, we have a group of volunteers that run that show. The principle players are Mary Gifford and Marty Engel. Here's a word from Marty: Maybe I caught him at a bad time. Don't talk to landscapers after an ice storm. Let's try Mary.

Thank you Mary, thank you Marty, Thank you volunteers for keeping this property kept up so it can be used for ministry and God's glory.

Closing:

God bless you, OCUMC. That as we wonder about the awesomeness of creation, as we ponder on our innerconnectedness to nature, may we continue to be a people that loves others values everyone. Go in peace!