

Welcome

Q&A - what's your favorite space?

Places we feel safe and loved tempt us to remain there. But Jesus shows us that these spaces gift us strength, courage and assurance we need to go back into a dangerous world with God's good news.

We've spent the first part of this year taking a deep breath. But of course after the deep breath comes the exhale. When we're filled with God's Holy Spirit, it's so we can share that Spirit with the world around us. It's time to exhale!

Message

We're at the close of the season of Epiphany! This time in the church year, we ask who God is.

This year, our series has been called Deep Breaths. We're now two full years into the COVID-19 pandemic. We're all tired. We're all wondering how many more variants we'll have to deal with, how much longer until we can relax a little.

The idea of *doing* more right now is exhausting. So we're not doing. We're resting - resting in who God is.

In both Greek and Hebrew, the same word means both 'breath' and 'spirit'. So as we breathe deeply here at the beginning of the year, we're also pausing to make space for God's Spirit to fill us.

We began where we should always begin: with an assurance that God is with us. We named our trauma and affirmed how important our gathering for worship is. We affirmed that God calls and equips us even now for the common good. We've seen that to be God's people is to be engaged in the world around us - not detached. And we saw that it takes spiritual practices to root us deeply in that space. Last week, we began looking at reengaging with the world around us in how we can create space for repentance and renewed relationships.

Today, at the end of Epiphany, we're asking what it looks like for us to reengage with the world around us. Because after you take a deep breath, you have to breathe out, right? We're filled with God's Holy Spirit so we can engage the world around us with God's love.

The final Sunday of Epiphany Sunday is called Transfiguration Sunday, and it centers on the story of Jesus on a mountaintop with a few of his disciples. We're going to read three different stories today that all connect back to this moment we're in, where we're ready to exhale.

Turn with us to [Luke 9](#):

The Synoptic Gospels - Matthew, Mark and Luke - follow a specific story arc. Jesus moves from his baptism (which we observed at the beginning of Epiphany) to his public ministry. The Transfiguration happens at about the mid-point, and it serves as sort of a hinge for the story. Jesus goes up to a mountain top (as we'll see in a moment). When he comes back down, he's headed for Jerusalem and his crucifixion.

As we read this story together, I want you to put yourselves in the shoes of Peter, James and John. Because we're them, after all! So let's watch how they react to what happens:

About eight days later Jesus took Peter, John, and James up on a mountain to pray. And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was transformed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly, two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared and began talking with Jesus. They were glorious to see. And they were speaking about his exodus from this world, which was about to be fulfilled in Jerusalem.

Peter and the others had fallen asleep. When they woke up, they saw Jesus' glory and the two men standing with him. As Moses and Elijah were starting to leave, Peter, not even knowing what he was saying, blurted out, "Master, it's wonderful for us to be here! Let's make three shelters as memorials—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." -- Luke 9:28–33 (NLT)

Okay, they go up the mountain and then they have this amazing, mystical experience. Moses and Elijah - the two prophets whose return signaled the end of the age - appeared and they have a conversation with Jesus about his coming *exodus* from the world (Luke dropping a timely pun!).

I have to imagine this was incredibly encouraging for Jesus. But for the disciples? They were so confused. You can see it in Peter's response. He wants to build three 'shelters' - here the translation does us a disservice. He actually asks to build three 'tabernacles' - tents that point back to the story of Moses.

Peter and the other disciples can be a little dense sometimes but - Moses, on top of a mountain, exodus... even they aren't that dense. They recognize that they're experiencing the presence of God among them. So Peter wants to do what Moses did when he encountered God - build a tabernacle. It's the biblical thing to do.

Let's pause the disciples' story here. We're going to hop back to the Exodus story but can we acknowledge before we do that we get Peter's reaction? Isn't it incredibly tempting to stay where God is, where it's safe, up on top of the mountain, away from the cares of the world?

This is what some folks look to religion for: to shield us from the world around us, to keep us from the real pain happening around us. Like Peter, when we have a genuine experience of God's love for us, we want to pitch a tent and stay here forever.

This is a real and valid experience of God. I don't want to rush past that. So we're not going to set up a tent or anything, but let's sing another song together.

Let's jump back to the Exodus story - turn with us to [Exodus 34](#). This is after Moses has led God's people out of slavery in Egypt. He's taken them to Mt. Sinai to enter into a covenant with God - if they will agree to be God's people, God's representatives in the world, then God will protect and provide for them. They agree, so God gives them the Covenant - embodied in the 10 commandments. God also gives the people instructions for building the first tabernacle, which they called the Tent of Meeting because it was how God made it safe for the people to be in relationship with God.

This was a big deal - because God is holy, God was actually dangerous for the people. God had to warn the people not to approach too close to the mountain or they'd be struck dead. Think of God's holiness sort of like radiation - it's dangerous to sin. The tabernacle (and later the temple) functioned as a sort of airlock. God was in the center and each layer you went out was a step down in holiness. The rituals surrounding worship in the tabernacle were all about making it safe for the people to be in relationship to God.

I know that sounds strange to us, but Israel understood this as a profound act of love on God's part. God loved Israel enough to jump through a lot of hoops to be in contact and relationship with us. After all, God could simply have remained on top of the mountain.

Now, keeping in mind that whole "God's holiness is dangerous" thing, let's read this bit from [Exodus 34](#):

When Moses came down Mount Sinai carrying the two stone tablets inscribed with the terms of the covenant, he wasn't aware that his face had become radiant because he had spoken to the Lord. So when Aaron and the people of Israel saw the radiance of Moses' face, they were afraid to come near him.

But Moses called out to them and asked Aaron and all the leaders of the community to come over, and he talked with them. Then all the people of Israel approached him, and Moses gave them all the instructions the Lord had given him on Mount Sinai. When Moses finished speaking with them, he covered his face with a veil. But whenever he went into the Tent of Meeting to speak with the Lord, he would remove the veil until he came out again. Then he would give the people whatever instructions the Lord had given him, and the people of Israel would see the radiant glow of his face. So he would put the veil over his face until he returned to speak with the Lord. -- Exodus 34:29-35 (NLT)

Moses absorbed God's holiness - which is a nice spiritual lesson for us: spending time in God's presence is what makes us holy. It's not about accomplishing tasks or feeling shame or apologizing a thousand times. It's about being with God.

Because of that, Moses' face glowed, which freaked everyone out. Not because his face glowed (which is admittedly weird). No because this was *dangerous*. So because everyone was afraid, Moses wore a veil over his face (which, just as a side note, is how women dressed).

When Peter is talking about building tabernacles for Jesus, Moses and Elijah, this is what he's thinking of. He understands he's having a powerful spiritual experience, something singular. Something that will change him and his friends. So he wonders, shouldn't we just stay here?

Before we get to Jesus' response, I want to go to hear from one other person who drew on this story of Moses' glowing face to

Turn with us to [2 Corinthians 3](#):

This is a letter from Paul to the church in Corinth. Paul founded the church in Corinth by insisting that non-Jews didn't have to become Jewish to be part of God's family. Now, a group has come to Corinth teaching otherwise. They're using Moses and the Covenant to argue their point. In this section, Paul flips their rhetoric back on them, illustrating the danger of hiding from the world and using God as an excuse:

The old way, with laws etched in stone, led to death, though it began with such glory that the people of Israel could not bear to look at Moses' face. For his face shone with the glory of God, even though the brightness was already fading away. Shouldn't we expect far greater glory under the new way, now that the Holy Spirit is giving life? If the old way, which brings condemnation, was glorious, how much more glorious is the new way, which makes us right with God! In fact, that first glory was not glorious at all compared with the overwhelming glory of the new way. So if the old way, which has been replaced, was glorious, how much more glorious is the new, which remains forever!

Since this new way gives us such confidence, we can be very bold. We are not like Moses, who put a veil over his face so the people of Israel would not see the glory, even though it was destined to fade away. -- 2 Corinthians 3:7–13 (NLT)

Paul says that, in Jesus, we have the same access Moses did. Through the Holy Spirit, who indwells us after we come into faith, we don't have to fear God's holiness. Quite the contrary: we can be bold. Because the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead lives in us now, making us examples of Jesus. Paul goes on:

But whenever someone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. For the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. So all of us who have had that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image.

Therefore, since God in his mercy has given us this new way, we never give up. We reject all shameful deeds and underhanded methods. We don't try to trick anyone or distort the word of God. We tell the truth before God, and all who are honest know this. -- 2 Corinthians 3:16–4:2 (NLT)

For Paul, our experience of Jesus compels us to turn to the world and love the world as Jesus loves the world. That's why, after Peter suggested they build tents and stay on the mountain, Jesus led them back down.

And wouldn't you know, the first thing they encounter is a father and his demon-possessed son.

Friends, it's good to take time with Jesus as we have during this series. It's good for us to name our trauma, to spend time in spiritual practices. To take time away from the world to consider how we can best love our neighbors.

But we always, always must breathe out. We must return to the world around us. Because that's what Jesus did. There at the top of the mountain, Jesus' spiritual encounter served specifically to prepare him for his death, his loving sacrifice for the world. So too, our times like this, to breathe deeply of God's Holy Spirit together.

Our experience of God's love should invite us to love the world, to love our neighbors the same way God does. And so when we leave from this space, we follow Jesus - off the mountain and back into a world that desperately needs his love.

Communion + Examen

We can approach Jesus' table with confidence and boldness!

What relationships or spaces has God invited you to step back from in the last few months?

Which of those relationships or spaces do you need to stay away from?

Which of those relationships or spaces is God calling you to reengage?

How can you return aware of God leading you?

Assignment + Blessing

"Therefore, since God in his mercy has given us this new way, we never give up. We reject all shameful deeds and underhanded methods. We don't try to trick anyone or distort the word of God. We tell the truth before God, and all who are honest know this."

Lent Preview