

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Seeking the breath of God in today's world

Lynette Sparks

Note from Douglas Kindschi: For this Christmas week, our guest columnist is Lynette Sparks, senior pastor at Grand Rapids' Westminster Presbyterian Church. She began her position this past June coming from the Third Presbyterian Church in Rochester, New York. Before receiving her Master of Divinity degree from Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, she had received an MBA from Harvard Business School and had a career in business.

Today's Insight is adapted from a sermon she gave on the Third Sunday of Advent, which in the Christian liturgical year draws passages from the book of Isaiah that is shared in both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.

Last week, a friend and colleague of mine posted a question on his Facebook feed: What would you suggest as the word of 2020? Well, as you can imagine, there were all sorts of one-word responses. Most of them spoke to the brutal reality of the year. They included words like alone, unprecedented, worse, exposed, ennui, unraveling, reckoning and traumatic. Not surprisingly, a few of the words offered were even more frank, and probably better left unsaid. There were just a few responses, however, that had a note of hope in them: opening, unveiling, family and transformational.

My first response was "breathless." That could be the word for 2020 that encapsulates so much of our world's despair. Breathless, as people around the world struggle with and die from COVID. Breathless, as in George Floyd's murder by a knee on his neck. Breathless, as in waiting and waiting for election results to be tallied and certified and recertified. Breathless, as in the feeling you get when you experience a sudden shock or an unexpected, earth-shattering loss. Even breathless as you try to juggle all of your responsibilities — home, work, schooling, caregiving — and try to somehow make it all work. It all leaves us breathless.

My second one-word response, however, is inspired by the prophetic message from Isaiah — a message that expresses all for which we long on our most breathless of days. And that word is "breath," as in the Hebrew noun "ruach" used throughout the Old Testament for the Spirit of God. It is only divine breath that can transform our breathless existence. It is only divine breath that has the creative power to bring life.

Lisa Sharon Harper, author and columnist for Sojourners magazine, writes about the Spirit of God moving over the waters in the Genesis creation story: "The wind, the breath, the violent exhalation of God moves over this surging mass of misery ... it's as if God's spirit ... positions herself to confront the misery and destruction, the sorrow and wickedness. She broods over it as if she is about to do



The Rev. Lynette K. Sparks is senior pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Grand Rapids.

battle with the darkness. Her strategy for engagement is birth — new life."

So, in light of the Spirit of God's movement in creation, I invite you to consider the words of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah:

"The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vindication of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion — to give them a garland of flowers instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord. ... They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities. ... For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up." (Isaiah 61:1-4, 11)

This is a creation story! It's about breathing life into a world breathless from so much destruction. This is about God's animating breath creating new life where even people of faith have a hard time imagining it's possible.

The world needs the good news of God's enlivening breath, especially when we're discouraged, and God longs to breathe it into our lungs. Imagine the people of Judah hearing this message in their discouragement and their frustration because their life wasn't anything like they expected. You see, they had gone through the hardest of times. Once exiled, now they were unsuccessfully trying to rebuild their destroyed community. It wasn't going well. They wanted to establish economic equality. They wanted to end the religious and political divides that split their community. But their reality wasn't even close to what they'd envisioned.

The joyful news in Isaiah is that God longed to breathe life into them with a salvation that was not only spiritual, but also material and concrete and incarnational; one that included not just a promise of life beyond this life, but one that embraced every aspect of life in the here and now; a salvation that encompassed not just a relationship between a single person and God, but one that restored all of creation into unbroken community with one another.

In other words, salvation that looks like justice. The Spirit of God breathes justice for all who are poor, heartbroken, mourning and held captive.

The message itself offered the possibility to transform. By hearing what God longed to do, those who were despairing could change the way they viewed themselves and the way they acted toward others. The message would replace their ashes with a festive garland of sweet-smelling flowers, their sorrowful mourning with the fragrant oil of gladness, their faint spirit with the joyful mantle of praise. New creation was possible now — not just later. And new creation was offered for all nations, not just Judah.

"As the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations." (Isaiah 61:11) After a long and bleak winter, can't you just smell the fresh, spring-time soil? Can't you just get a whiff of new blossoms?

Isaiah's message offers the hope of new creation to us in our breathless world. It invites us to inhale the breath of God deeply. Receive the word of hope that oxygenates our souls, enriching them with divine possibility. Smell the rich soil and the tender shoots that spring forth.

And then, exhale the breath of God onto the breathless world around you. For this joyful message of salvation also calls us to be God's agents of new creation, planting seeds of justice that grow into God's intentions for the world. Justice is God's work of setting the world right, and God is passionate about doing just that for all who are weak, or broken, or exploited. God calls us to love justice as much as God does.

Because even though we're open to pursuing justice in the outside world, sometimes we're blind to the injustice we perpetuate among ourselves. Seeing those places takes some careful work, introspection and courage. Especially around concerns for racial justice and representation, are there cherished icons or practices or traditions that we need to reexamine? Or do we hold back from seeking justice because we mourn what we might lose for ourselves?

Can we imagine the new creation waiting to be born, as we deeply inhale the breath of God? Can we imagine the joy of building up all who are ruined and devastated? Can we imagine the joy of bringing justice to all who are oppressed, brokenhearted and held captive? Can we imagine the joy? Justice and joy are not mutually exclusive. They are both biblical, and they are both filled with creative possibility — even the possibility of God's animating breath filling the lungs of a newborn, in a breathless city called Bethlehem.

interfaith@gvsu.edu