

Luke 1: 26-38  
Advent4C  
December 18, 2016  
Lincoln Street UMC

The Great Oxygenation Event. More than a billion years ago, evolving over thousands of years. In this event, life slowly transformed on this planet through the wonder of a microscopic organism, cyanobacteria. Prior to their arrival, anaerobic organisms dominated and they lived off gases like methane.

But the new critters in town, cyanobacteria, lived off the light of the sun and produced oxygen - the first creatures to create through photosynthesis.

And they were successful at it too! So, little by little as the cyanobacteria became increasingly abundant, oxygen began to fill the oceans and the air above. And from these humble origins, air, our atmosphere, was born.

Without these friends of ours, life as we know it would not exist. *We* would not exist. Every minute, we breathe at least 12 times this gift of air - that's over 17,000 times each day. And respiration, getting oxygen to move throughout our bodies, is the reason we can sit here today anticipating the advent of God.

Air is what inspires us. From the Latin origins to blow into, to breathe upon. *Spirare* means to breathe. We breathe the air and from such animation we create, love, and help. In essence, from breathing air we are inspired to the fullness of our humanity.

Air is what enables each of us to fully express our individuality. Air fills our lungs and fills our spirits and we find ourselves able to sing, dance, play, write, run, bike, parent, laugh, cry, hug, cook, knit, build fires, tend the soil and carry water.

Air is at the very heart of life. In every breath we take we engage the great breadth and depth of what is before us. We are given the ability to face the struggle and share the joy.

Is there any element more intimate? More closely in touch with the very core of our living?

I think not. But nor is there any element more transcendent. Air, the atmosphere, sky, the cosmos, this element ranges far beyond our next breath, and out far beyond what our air-inspired minds can fathom.

We stare at the starry sky and marvel at the immensity. To think that each of those points of light have been traveling for years and years to meet our eventual gaze.

The amount of space between us and them is tremendous. For while light is scattered across the sky, we also know that there is far more emptiness between than there are star suns.

What we think of as sky, air - although perhaps not our breathable atmosphere, called interstellar medium by scientists - stretches and fills space far beyond our measure.

As Douglas Adams so eloquently put it in *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Universe*, "Space is big. Really big. You just won't believe how vastly hugely mindbogglingly big it is. I mean, you may think it's a long way down the road to the chemist's, but that's just peanuts to space."

I found on one website an analogy that puts it another way.

“Space is so big that the distance between local stars in our galaxy is proportional to two grains of sand more than 30 miles apart.”<sup>1</sup>

So when we gaze out at the starry night, we are right to feel a little overwhelmed and insignificant. Air, sky, space around us expands out beyond what generally our minds can calculate.

And we are left staring in wonder at a beautiful kaleidoscope of glitter. Giving thanks that we can appreciate how the light leads us to experience the transcendence of our Creator, rather than having to understand and explain it all.

The intimate and the transcendent. The air we breathe and the sky we marvel at.

And all of it from the closest to the farthest, all of it embracing and encasing us. The alpha and omega. The womb of our life.<sup>2</sup>

This tension, this paradox, is exactly what brings us to wonder every Christmas and why we prepare every Advent. The story of a child born to Mary and Joseph is the telling of God both incarnate, intimately among us, and God transcendent, hosting angels to sing and stars to shine.

It is lullaby and crashing waves. Gentle song and untamable waters. What comforts us and transports us.

This Christmas story that we anticipate is a story about air. About the intimate and the transcendent.

That great arc of life, from beginning to end. The womb of all present and all potential.

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<sup>1</sup> From Tom Murphy at <http://www.mnn.com/earth-matters/space/blogs/mind-blowing-distance-between-local-stars-in-our-galaxy-is-analogous-to-2->

<sup>2</sup> I credit Diana Butler Bass for this image. She describes the atmosphere as the earth's womb in her book *Grounded*, page 109.

We hear in scripture this morning of how God's breath blows through Mary's womb and she carries the seed of our Creator to birth. We smile at her faithfulness and the way in which this story has been carried through the ages.

But this year, as we give thanks for the element of Air, perhaps we might be transported by this story in a new way.

A way that helps us see how we are even now carried in a womb of our own.

Cyanobacteria first created the oxygen tent that now breathes through us. *God* breathes through us even as we also know that we are but a small player in the vast cosmos. We are filled by God's spirit - inspired - even as we hurdle through a space far beyond our calculations and over which we have little to no mastery.

Let the immensity and the intimacy be the womb of creation for us. Let Air 'bring us clarity and strength, the power to hear the inner sounds, to sweep out old patterns, and to bring change and challenge.'<sup>3</sup>

Let the gift of Air be what helps us take that deep breath to sing. Sing out our own magnificats.

"All the broken hearts  
shall rejoice;  
all those  
who are heavy laden,

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<sup>3</sup> Taken from a poem by Robert Metzner, *Earth Prayers*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1991, page 135.

whose eyes are tired  
and do not see,  
shall be lifted up  
to meet with  
the motherly healer.  
The battered souls and bodies  
shall be healed;  
the hungry  
shall be fed;  
the imprisoned  
shall be free;  
all her earthly children  
shall regain joy  
in the reign  
of the just and loving one  
coming for you  
coming for me  
in this time  
in this world.<sup>4</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Sun Ai Lee Park, from "Prophecy," first published in Hong Kong in the journal of Asian feminists theology, In God's Image (April 1986).