In Him is Life
The Gospel of John

Even in the Age of COVID, Jesus Breathes on Us
John 20:22

Introduction
When my kids John and Zoe were little, I would rub my noses with my nose, and we would breathe the same air. We called it a nose kiss. Of course you see parents doing this with their kids. I also learned later that the Maori people of New Zealand, the indigenous people of that land, have a tradition of touching their foreheads together, almost touching their noses, and breathing the same air. It's a sign of trust, intimacy, and solidarity. Can you imagine doing that? Can you imagine feeling the solemnity of that?

Relevance
I want you to keep that in your mind because we are going to look at the moment Jesus breathed on his disciples. In John 20:22, the Gospel of John records this very poignant moment. "When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

I want to also register my own range of feelings about this action because I, like all of you, have been shaped by the COVID pandemic. So breathing someone else's air makes me feel a little on edge. Even though I know we're breathing each other's air all the time. But I have to calm myself down because truth be told, I feel a little nervous about consciously thinking about that reality.

Actually, now that we have gone through COVID, breathing Jesus' air -- breathing Jesus' own breath -- is even more important for us to think about. In English, at least in the U.S., we do have an expression that we use about the air we breathe: "It's in the air we breathe." In my experience, I have said that about competitiveness: "competitiveness is in the air we breathe." I have said that about racism: "racism is in the air we breathe." And now we have to think about COVID being "in the air we breathe." And there is a little more bad news that I have for us. But Jesus has really good news for us.

So in this message, we're going to look at this verse, and I'll address three main questions:
1. Why Jesus did this
2. What it meant to the disciples
3. What it means for us

Context:
Two Sundays ago, we celebrated Easter or Resurrection Sunday, to remember the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, from the tomb, and into a victorious new life. We're going to deepen our understanding of Jesus' resurrection. Pastor Val read this verse last week and now we're going to do a deep dive into this verse. Or should I say we're going to inhale deeply the air of truth.

We're looking at the Gospel of John, which might have been the last of the four Gospels written, sometime in the second half of the very first century. This book is considered by some the crowning jewel of the four biographies of Jesus of Nazareth.

Why Jesus Did This
So let's look at the first question. Why did Jesus do this? Jesus breathed on his disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Now clearly Jesus wanted to associate the Holy Spirit with his own breathing.

So, okay. Let's understand that. In both the Old Testament and the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is compared to wind. Why? Because the powerful movement of God is like wind. The Spirit of God is invisible. Air and wind are also invisible, but you can feel the effects of the wind blowing. So that's a good parallel. So in Genesis 1, the Spirit of God hovered over creation as God spoke, and gave it shape. God's Spirit blew on the Red Sea as God parted the waters and delivered Israel out of bondage in Egypt. Earlier in the Gospel of John, Jesus himself said, "The Spirit

blows like a wind. You don't know where it's coming from or going." The Spirit is the invisible presence of God blowing around in the world.

So why does Jesus breathe on the disciples? Why not flap his hand really fast and fan the disciples? Or, "Jesus took a palm branch and fanned the disciples and said the Holy Spirit is awesome -- just feel how awesome the Holy Spirit is." It's not just the feeling of wind that's important to Jesus. Jesus connects the Holy Spirit with his breath.

So there are at least two reasons why Jesus did this. First, Jesus was doing what God did all the way back in the original garden of Eden. God breathed into Adam. In Genesis 2:7, "Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." (Gen.2:7)

So when the Jehovah's Witnesses come to your door and say, "Jesus is not God," you can say, Jesus is God, and as the Gospel of John portrays Jesus, Jesus is retelling and reenacting God's role in the original creation. How do we see that? The Gospel John starts with the opening line, "In the beginning was the Word" (Jn.1:1). What book of the Bible opens like that? Genesis. "In the beginning," God spoke (Gen.1:1). Then in John's Gospel, Jesus does seven miracles; he gives seven discourses; he says seven "I am" statements, like I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world, and so on. Why this structure of seven things? Because in Genesis 1, God created the world in seven days. So seven here because seven back there. And then Jesus breathes on his disciples and gives them the new life of his Spirit (Jn.20:22). Why? Because back in the garden, God breathed into Adam and gave him the first life (Gen.2:7). So why did Jesus do this? Because Jesus is God, bringing forth a new creation and a new humanity.

The second reason Jesus breathes onto his disciples is because breath comes from our bodies. Like if I breathed on you now, you might like the breath mint I had this morning. But that doesn't come from deep inside me. It's just masking my coffee breath anyway. Or, if I had COVID or some other virus, and I breathed on you, you might catch it from my breath, because that would come from deep inside me. But that'd be bad. Normal human breath is like a vapor. But with Jesus, it's just the opposite. Jesus has the cure for our sin-sickness. And we can catch our healing from his breath. Why? Because his breath is from deep inside his body!

What's so special about Jesus' body? Well, think about it: What did Jesus do to his human body? He cured his body of the sin-sickness that we all have! Think about COVID. Wouldn't it be amazing if there was someone with super healing powers? Someone who could get the COVID virus and then fight the disease, beat it, and then breathe into us the cure? Breathe into me! Breathe into me!

Well here's the bad news, the tough news. We have a disease that is way worse than COVID. In Romans 7, Paul the apostle described his life experience before meeting Jesus. And he felt like a prisoner in his own body. Because his body had the sin-sickness. He said, "I do evil things I don't want to do. I don't do the good things I want to do. These symptoms are bad, even fatal. I agree with God's commands, but something in me resists, and messes me all up!" So he said, "I needed Jesus to come into me by his Spirit!"

Why Jesus? Why not -- oh, the ghost of Grandpa Joe? And why not a breath mint? Because Grandpa Joe couldn't beat the sin-sickness, and he didn't. Neither can breath mints, and cosmetic, superficial solutions are not real solutions. Only Jesus lived the life we couldn't live, died the death we couldn't die, and killed the thing that was killing us. John 7:38 – 39 says Jesus couldn't give the Holy Spirit before he died and rose again. Because what would be the point of that? He hadn't yet completed his life of faithfulness, and he hadn't yet conquered the sin-sickness by his death and resurrection. When Jesus rose from the dead, he rose up with a renewed human body -- a God-drenched, God-soaked human body where God's cure lives in him and is him, so when the resurrected Jesus breathed out, he breathed out air that had his victory in it!

What It Meant for the Disciples

So what was this like for the disciples? The disciples are sitting there processing this rumor. Some of the women disciples said they saw the tomb empty and even saw him! But what happened to his body? They are all thinking about his body. What happened to his body.

Then Jesus showed up, in his body. And he breathed out of his body. Maybe he came up to each of them, forehead to forehead, and shared their air? Maybe he breathed out when they breathed in. Maybe they touched noses with Jesus. Picture them doing that.

For them, it's like communion, but even more direct. Communion is the bread and wine that Jesus told us to eat and drink. He said, "This is my body, broken for you. Eat this. And this is my blood, poured out for you. Drink this." It's all about his body. Eat this. Drink this. Now, "This is my breath, breathed out for you. Breathe this in." This is my body. This comes from my body.

Jesus' breath is like the breath of a marathon runner. He conquered the marathon of human life in the fall and under the empire. Jesus showed up the empire and the powers. He took their best punches and worst curses and he was still 100% faithful to God the Father. That's how spiritually fit his body is. The Egyptian Christian leader, Cyril of Alexandria from the fifth century, connected the breath of Jesus and the Spirit of Jesus to the strength of Jesus:

> "He at once sanctifies them by vouchsafing His Spirit unto them, through the outward sign of His Breath, that we might be firmly convinced that the Holy Spirit is not alien to the Son, but Consubstantial [one essence, one nature, one substance] with Him… And why? Because… they could not have triumphed over the snares of sin, if they had not… been transformed into something other than they were before. Therefore, also, it was said to one of old time: The Spirit of the Lord will come upon thee, and thou shalt be turned into another man [1 Samuel 10:6]; and the Prophet Isaiah also declared that those who waited upon the Lord should renew their strength."[1]

This is why Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that if you wanted to join the Civil Rights Movement, you had to reflect every day on the life and teachings of Jesus.

What It Means for Us
Which brings us to the last point: What it means for us.

First, it means we have to get face to face with Jesus, and breathe in. The older Christian traditions use incense in the worship service -- like if you've been to a Catholic or Orthodox service The priest swings the incense; you can see the smoke; you can smell the fragrance. That is meant to represent Jesus breathing out the Spirit. And the smell of the incense is meant to help us breathe in what Jesus breathes out: his own Spirit. Back then, because there was no such thing as deodorant. And when people gathered in a house or a building, it probably helped to smell something other than our bodies. How can we smell Jesus' body, and Jesus' breath over our bodies and our breath? Now in our context today, we don't light incense in service, but if you have a scented candle at home, you might incorporate that into your prayer life. Get face to face with Jesus. Imagine Jesus using the custom of the Maori in New Zealand. Let him touch his forehead to your forehead and breathe into you. Spend time every day reflecting on the life and teachings of Jesus. And when you do, use your senses to stay engaged and focus. And just remember: When you picture Jesus touching his forehead to yours, that is God!!

Second, recognize the invisible. If you believe in Jesus, then he is present in you by his Spirit. He may be invisible, but he is there in you, just like air is invisible, but also in you. That's important because when we look in the mirror, we often see the same person looking back at you. And our emotions go up and down because of what we see there. You might also have a mental picture of yourself in a moral sense. And maybe you like what you see and maybe not. But the challenge is to recognize Jesus' invisible presence. He is closer to you than your own breath. You have to let his love for you and in you shape your thinking.

That's important because we react to other people and to circumstances based on how we've seen other people react. When the teacher does this, my friends do that, so I will do that as well. When I am disrespected, I will react based on what I see other people doing. But what about Jesus in you invisibly, by his Spirit? How does he respond? What is he wanting to do through you?

Illus: This past week, two stressful things happened at around the same time. One was doing my taxes. The other was disagreeing with a friend about a project we are working on. So in my family, I do the house part of our taxes. I tally up all the receipts, and repairs. Ugh! I also did my dad's taxes and my mom's taxes. My mom passed away in October, but she wound up owing taxes. You know how they say, "There are only two things you can be sure about in life: death and taxes"? Well, it's true. And even the dead can owe taxes! So I was stressed. Meanwhile, I

[1] Found on https://catenabible.com/jn/20/22. Full quote below on Appendix A.

was texting with a friend with whom I'm working on a project. And we disagreed about something. We were trying to work it out over texting. I felt impatient, because I just wanted to get it done, like I wanted to get my taxes done. I also didn't think my friend was giving me good enough reasons, which I also feel when I do my taxes because I believe we can build a better tax system. But I took a deep breath. I recognized the invisible presence of Jesus in me. I texted back and asked to talk on Zoom later. I asked, "I don't want to just sweep aside this difference between us, and I don't want to just decide something to just move on. I want to take this opportunity to understand you better. Are you concerned that I'm not going to do something well? What is it?" And to make a long story short, it was such a good conversation, where we really did come to understand each other better.

Third, share in Jesus' breath. We need to have good breath, and not bad breath. What do I mean? Jesus' breath is also an expression which means his teaching and his Spirit. Here are two verses that highlight that: "He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure" (John 3:34). "It is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (John 6:63). So Jesus' breath and his Spirit and his teaching are linked up. Jesus has words of truth, insight, encouragement, and challenge. In any situation, Jesus can speak his words through you if you're in touch with his Spirit. I'm not talking about slavishly repeating the exact words Jesus used. But I am talking about inflecting Jesus' words in your voice and with your story. So think about it. Do you have better words? Do you have better breath?

Appendix A: Cyril of Alexandria (also quoted on https://catenabible.com/jn/20/22)

"He at once sanctifies them by vouchsafing His Spirit unto them, through the outward sign of His Breath, that we might be firmly convinced that the Holy Spirit is not alien to the Son, but Consubstantial with Him… And why? Because they could have done nothing pleasing unto God, and could not have triumphed over the snares of sin, if they had not been clothed with power from on high, and been transformed into something other than they were before. Therefore, also, it was said to one of old time: The Spirit of the Lord will come upon thee, and thou shalt be turned into another man; and the Prophet Isaiah also declared that those who waited upon the Lord should renew their strength. The wise Paul, too, when he says that he surpassed some in his labours, that is, in the deeds of an Apostle, adds at once: Yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me. Besides, we say this, that the disciples would never at all have understood the mystery that is in Christ, nor have been true guides in this knowledge, if they had not advanced in the light of the Spirit to a revelation of things which surpass man's reason and understanding, a revelation which is able to point out to them the heights to which they were bound to ascend; for no man can say Jesus is Lord, as Paul says, but in the Holy Spirit. As, then, they were destined to proclaim that Jesus was the Lord, that is, to preach that He was God and Lord of necessity, therefore they received the grace of the Holy Spirit in immediate connexion with the office of apostleship, Christ granting Him unto them, not ministering to the desires of another, but rather vouchsafing Him of Himself; for the Spirit could only come down unto us from the Father through the Son. The old and written Law, however, which contained shadows and types of the reality, ordained that the appointment of priests should be performed in a more physical way, so to say, and that their appointment should be attended with more outward display. For the blessed Moses, by God's command, bade Aaron and the Levites wash themselves with water: then he slew the ram of consecration and anointed with the blood the tip of Aaron's right ear, as is written, and also put of the blood upon the thumb of the right hand, and upon the big toe of the right foot, giving an outline and type, as in a picture, of the mystery concerning Christ. For in the presence here of water and blood, the instruments of sanctification, how can there be any question that in an obscure type an outline was given of the fair beauty of the reality? Our Lord Jesus Christ, transforming into the power of truth the figure of the Law, consecrates through Himself the ministers of the Divine Altar. For He is the Lamb of consecration, and He consecrates by actual sanctification, making men partakers in His Nature, through participation in the Spirit, and in some sort strengthening the nature of man into a power and glory that is superhuman. And there can be no doubt that the explanation I have here given can be proved not to err from the truth. But, perhaps, someone will come and say as follows, with a praiseworthy desire for knowledge, it may be, putting to us the question, "Where then, and when, did the Saviour's disciples receive the grace of the Spirit? When the Saviour appeared unto them in the house, immediately after the Resurrection, and breathed upon them, saying: Receive ye the Holy Ghost; or in the days of the holy Pentecost, when, as they were again assembled together in one place, suddenly there came from heaven a sound as of the rushing of a mighty wind. And there appeared unto them tongues parting asunder, like as of fire; and it sat upon each one of them. And they began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance?" For either, such an one will say, we must suppose that a double grace was given unto them, or we must remain in ignorance of the occasion on which they, in fact, became partakers in the Holy Spirit; if indeed our Saviour's saying, and that which is written in the Acts of the holy Apostles, is found to be true. And, indeed, the question may well excite our perplexity, especially as Christ Himself said: It is expedient for you that I go away; for if I go not away the Comforter cannot come unto you; but when I depart, I will send Him unto you; for the inquirer will perhaps go on to say, "The Truth, that is, Christ, cannot lie. When, then, He said in plain words that the Comforter would not come unto the disciples unless He were taken up unto the Father, but of a surety He would send Him then, when He was in heaven at His side; how, then, can He be supposed to grant the gift of the Spirit, though His journey from hence was not yet accomplished?" Still, though the inquiry is very obscure, and very likely to cause perplexity, it yet allows of an appropriate solution, when we remember our faith that Christ is not as one of ourselves, but rather is God, and of God, and so exercises dominion over His own Words, and moulds them to suit His purposes. For He proclaimed that He would send down to us from heaven the Comforter, when He was ascended to God the Father; and this, indeed, He did, when He had gone away to the Father, and vouchsafed to shed forth the Spirit abundantly upon all who were willing to receive it. For any man could receive it, through faith, that is, and Holy Baptism; and then was fulfilled that which was spoken by the voice of the Prophet: I will pour out of My Spirit upon all flesh. But it was necessary that the Son should appear as co-operating with the Father in granting the Spirit; it was necessary that those who believed on Him should understand that He is the Power of the Father, That has created this whole world, and called man out of nothing into being. For God the Father, at the beginning, by His own Word, took of the dust of the ground, as is written, and fashioned the animal, that is man, and endowed him with a soul, according to His Will, and illuminated him with a share of His own Spirit; for He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, as is

written. And when it came to pass that through disobedience man fell under the power of death, and lost his ancient honour, God the Father built him up and restored him to newness of life, through the Son, as at the beginning. And how did the Son restore him? By the death of His own Flesh He slew death, and brought the race of man back again into incorruption; for Christ rose again for us. In order, then, that we might learn that He it was Who at the beginning created our nature, and sealed us with the Holy Spirit, our Saviour again grants the Spirit, through the outward sign of His Breath, to the holy disciples, as being the firstfruits of renewed nature. For Moses writes concerning our creation of old, that God breathed into man's nostrils the breath of life. As, then, at the beginning, man was formed and came into being, so likewise is he renewed; and as he was then formed in the Image of his Creator, so likewise now, by participation in the Spirit, is he transformed into the Likeness of his Maker. For that the Spirit impresses the Saviour's Image on the hearts of those who receive Him surely does not admit of question; for Paul plainly exhorteth those who had fallen through weakness into observance of the Law, in the words: My little children, of whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you. For he says that Christ will not be formed in them save by partaking of the Holy Spirit, and living according to the law of the Gospel. Therefore, as in the firstfruits of creation, which is made regenerate into incorruption and glory and into the Image of God, Christ establishes anew His own Spirit in His disciples. For it was necessary that we should also perceive this truth, namely, that He brings down and grants the Spirit unto us. Therefore, also, He said: All things, whatsoever the Father hath, are Mine. And as the Father hath, of Himself and in Himself, His own Spirit, so also the Son hath the Spirit in Himself, because He is Consubstantial with Him, and essentially proceeded from Him, having by Nature in Himself all the attributes of His Father. From the following fact we can prove that, many as were the actions that He repeatedly promised us that He would perform in due season, He even in part anticipated the appointed time in the performance of them, for our edification, that we might be fully convinced that whatsoever He has spoken will assuredly come to pass. He declared that He would raise up the dead, and bring back again to life those who are lying in the earth and in tombs. The hour cometh, He says, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done ill, unto the resurrection of judgment. And, desiring to satisfy us that He could readily accomplish this, He taught, saying: I am the Resurrection and the Life. But, inasmuch as the vastness of the miracle made it difficult of belief that the dead could ever be restored to life, He anticipated to our profit the time of the Resurrection, and gave us a sign by raising Lazarus and the widow's son and the daughter of Jairus. And what else besides? As He said that full of glory would be the resurrection of the Saints, for then, He says, shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the Kingdom of their Father, in order that here again He might be believed to speak truth, He granted the sight thereof before the time to the disciples. For He took Peter and James and John, and went up into the mountain, and was transfigured before them: and His Face did shine as lightning, and His garments became white as snow. Just as, then, although He promised to accomplish these things in their season, yet He performed the works in part and with a limited scope even out of due time, as an earnest and foretaste of that which was expected to come to pass and to affect the whole world, so doing in order that faith in Him might not be shaken; even so, likewise, after having said that He would send the Comforter to us when He went away to the Father, and having fixed this occasion for granting this grace universally, He performed in the persons of His disciples the first instalment, as it were, of the promise, for the many just and sufficient reasons we have previously given. They, therefore, partook of the Holy Spirit when He breathed on them, saying, Receive ye the Holy Ghost; for it were impossible for Christ to lie, and He would never have said "Receive" without giving; but in the days of Holy Pentecost, when God more openly proclaimed His grace, and manifested the stablishment of the Holy Spirit in their hearts, there appeared unto them tongues through flame, not signifying the beginning of the gift of the Spirit in their hearts, but rather having reference to the time when they were first endowed with the gift of languages. It is written, indeed, that they began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. Note, that they began to speak, not to receive sanctification, and that the gift of divers tongues came down upon them; and this was the working of the Spirit that was in them. For just as the Father spake from heaven, and bare witness to His Son, saying, This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased; and did this to satisfy the minds of those who heard, uttering, or causing to be uttered, a sound as of some instrument which fell upon the ear; even so, also, in the case of the holy disciples He made the manifestation of the grace given them more public, sending down upon them tongues as of fire, and causing the descent of the Holy Spirit to resemble the sound of the rushing of a mighty wind. And that this very portent was given unto the Jews by way of a sign, you will readily see, if you listen to God, the Lord of all, saying by the mouth of the |678 Prophet: By men of strange tongues, and by the lips of strangers, will I speak unto this people, and yet will they not believe. And to the intent that we might believe that the blessed disciples did, in fact, partake of the Holy Spirit, and were from henceforth honoured with the grace of Christ from above, and that they were able to expound the truth, and that the glory of their apostleship was worthy all admiration, witness being borne thereto by the gift from on high, therefore it was that fire came down in the form of tongues. I think, indeed, that I have here said enough to accurately explain the

meaning of the passage; but, inasmuch as we are bound to take every precaution in our treatise, that no stumblingblock spring up to offend the brethren through the carping spirit of any amongst us, let us make this addition to what we have said, and refute the vain talk that we may expect will be started. We shall find, then, in the passage that follows, the words: Thomas, called Didymus, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. How, then, someone may not unreasonably inquire, if he were away, was he in fact made partaker in the Holy Spirit when the Saviour appeared unto the disciples and breathed on them, saying: Receive ye the Holy Ghost? We reply that the power of the Spirit pervaded every man who received grace, and fulfilled the aim of the Lord Who gave Him unto them; and Christ gave the Spirit not to some only but to all the disciples. Therefore, if any were absent, they also received Him, the munificence of the Giver not being confined to those only who were present, but extending to the entire company of the holy Apostles. And that this interpretation is not strained, or our idea extravagant, we may convince you from Holy Writ itself, bringing forward as a proof a passage in the Books of Moses. The Lord God commanded the all-wise Moses to select elders, to the number of seventy, from the assembly of the Jews, and plainly declared: I will take of the Spirit which is upon thee and will put it upon them. Moses, as he was bidden, brought them together, and fulfilled the Divine decree. Two only of the men who were included in the number of the seventy elders were left behind, and remained in the assembly, to wit, Eldad and Medad. Then when God put upon them all the Divine Spirit, as He had promised, those whom Moses had collected together immediately received grace, and prophesied; but none the less also the two who were in the assembly prophesied, and, in fact, the grace from above came upon them first. Nay, further, Joshua, that was called the son of Nun, who was the constant attendant of Moses, not understanding at once the meaning of the mystery, but thinking that after the manner of Dathan and Abiram they were rivals in the art of prophecy to those whom Moses had brought together, said unto him: Eldad and Medad do prophesy in the camp; my lord Moses, forbid them. And what answered that truly wise and great man, seeing in his wisdom the working of the grace given unto them, and the power of the Spirit? Enviest thou for my sake? Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them! Observe how he rebukes the saying of Joshua, who knew not what had been done. Would that, he says, the Spirit were given to all the people! Nay, this will indeed come to pass in due season, when the Lord, that is, Christ, will grant unto them His Spirit; breathing upon His holy Apostles as upon the firstfruits of those whose due it is to receive Him, and saying: Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Then, if Thomas were absent, he was not cut off from receiving the Spirit, for the Spirit pervaded all whose due it was to receive Him, and who were included among the number of His honoured disciples."