

March 29, 2017 – Genesis 2:1-9 & John 15:26-16:15

What is life? What does it mean to be alive? And, conversely, what does it mean to be dead? This is one of those great questions of the universe that has spurred on philosophers, poets, theologians, and artists throughout history.

In more recent years, it's been a central question of scientists as well. Biologists try to pin down a definition of life by looking at things like whether an object responds to stimuli and adapts to its environment. Whether it metabolizes food and reproduces. And even then things like viruses still end up in a grey area.

For Christians, however, the definition of life is tad bit more straightforward. Something is alive if God has given it the breath of life. Now, that definition may not be particularly useful for a biologist. But it's actually pretty important for us theologically.

Because it means God is the source of all life. He is the giver of all life. You are not alive unless he says you're alive. And even then, not all life is created equal. The life God gave to a blade of grass or an ant or a squirrel is different than the life that he gave to human beings. Virtually all of creation was made at God's command. He spoke and it existed.

But God didn't speak human beings into existence. No, as we heard in our first lesson, he formed us from the dust of the earth. He crafted us out of the ground in his image. And then, most importantly, he breathed into us. He breathed life into our bodies. And then, only then, did we become living creatures.

The idea of God breathing life into us is important. And it goes back to the very word “breath.” You see, the Hebrew and Greek languages in which the Bible was written are very, very different. Different alphabet. Different grammar. Different syntax. They have almost nothing in common.

Except that in both Hebrew and Greek the words for breath, wind, and spirit are combined into one word. In Hebrew, its the word “ruach.” In Greek, it's the word “pneuma.” From which we get the words pneumonia and pneumatic. Breath, wind, and spirit. In the ancient world, they were all the same thing. The same word. The same concept.

So when we hear about God breathing into Adam the breath of life, what we're really reading is God breathing his own Spirit into Adam. The Holy Spirit.

Every other creature on the planet has its own breath of life. That was spoken into existence with that creature. But human beings are different. We were created from God's very Spirit. And we aren't really alive without that Spirit.

That's the reason why we say in the Nicene Creed, “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of Life.” There is no life for mankind without the Holy Spirit. You are spiritually dead without the Holy Spirit within you. And if you physically die without the Holy Spirit, then you are dead eternally. Because there is no life apart from him.

From dust you were created. To dust you will return. And without the Holy Spirit to make you something more than dust. Without the Holy Spirit to give you new life. That's all you'll ever be. A pile of dust.

So you can see, it's pretty important when we say that God breathed into us the breath of life. It kinda defines our very existence. It is the Biblical definition of life for us.

And yet, I think there's something to be learned from the secular, scientific definition of life too. Because, as I said, biologists look for those key attributes of life that they can easily see: responding to stimuli, adapting to the environment, metabolizing food, and reproducing. And really, the one thing all those characteristics have in common is that they all involve movement.

Living things move. And they move intentionally. They move with purpose. They move in response to stimuli. They move to adapt. They move to find food. They move to reproduce. And that's pretty obvious to us.

If you went to visit someone in the hospital. And they are laying in bed, expressionless and motionless. They don't look at you. They don't speak. They don't wake up when you shake them. They don't move at all. What's the first thing you're going to think? Probably... they're dead. Or, at the very least, they're almost dead. Healthy, living people move.

The same is true when we look at ourselves spiritually. Spiritually healthy, living people move. But it's not just any movement. It's movement with purpose.

We see that in our second lesson today from John's Gospel. Here, Jesus is promising to his disciples that after he leaves, he will send them the Helper. Who, as we will eventually learn, is the Holy Spirit.

And the Holy Spirit, as he always does, will give the disciples life. And with that life will come movement. Movement with purpose.

And in particular, movement to bear witness about Jesus. He says exactly that in those first few verses. *“But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.”*

He reiterates that a little later. When the Helper comes he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment. And he will do that through the disciples.

He reiterates it again a little later. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide the disciples into all truth. And then he will glorify the Son through them to all the world.

The work of the Spirit is to reveal Christ to us and to all the world through us. And we see that over and over again throughout Scripture. From the prophecies of the Old Testament to Peter's sermon on Pentecost morning to the evangelism of Paul throughout the Roman world.

When the Spirit gives life, he also gives movement. And when the Spirit moves us, we tell others about the work of Jesus Christ. That is the nature of new life in Christ. That is the nature of the faith the Holy Spirit gives to us.

Which means that the art of living by faith is the art of sharing our faith. Because if you are, indeed, alive by the Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ, then you are moving to tell others about him.

Unless, of course, you're playing dead. Which is, unfortunately, how a lot of Christians spend their lives. As spiritual couch potatoes. So motionless, you can't even tell if they're still alive. As spiritual opossums. Hoping if they just stay perfectly still, no one will even notice that they're there.

Now, aside from the fact that that's a pretty lazy, boring, cowardly way of using this great gift of life and Spirit that God has given you. It's also kind of a dangerous one. As more than one elderly person has told me over the years, if you don't keep moving, you're dead.

And I've seen exact thing happen, both physically and spiritually. I've seen elderly people who were active and vibrant. And then suffered some injury or illness that made them bedridden. And they just withered away until they died.

And I've seen young, healthy people. Who grew up in the church, active and vibrant in their faith. And then let distractions pull them away from Word and Sacrament. Let fear silence their testimony. Until they became so spiritually motionless that they just withered away from their faith.

And, you know, that second one is a much more tragic death. A much more eternal death. But it's also a much more avoidable. Because, as Jesus says, living and moving by the Spirit is, in a way, effortless. If the Spirit is within you – and he most certainly is – you will know what to say. You will know what to do.

The Spirit will guide you into all truth. Because you are alive in the only way that matters. You are alive with the very breath of God. And as long as he lives, you will too. Amen.