

Grounded: Air

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, September 28, 2025, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Job 1:13-21](#) and [Ezekiel 37:1-10](#)

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I wonder if fish know that they're wet. I know we talked about water a couple weeks ago and that this sermon is supposed to be about air. Still, I wonder if fish know that they're wet. Since they spend their lives in water, being wet is what's normal for them. Being in the air, getting dry, would be the peculiar experience. And if the way you oxygenate your blood is by drawing oxygen out of water through your gills, would being in the air feel dangerous, even suffocating?

Our experiences influence much of what we feel about things. Since the beginning of the month and this worship series, I've had a few conversations about the elements we've been exploring, and what people feel about those elements. Having lived in Carnation, Washington, for a decade, you might think that the prospect of flooding would cause a nervous response in me. It was typical for the Snoqualmie Valley floor to flood each winter. But stronger, more formative experiences with water are at work in me. Learning to swim at an early age, and spending wonderful summer days canoeing and sailing when I was a child have led me to trust water. That, plus the fact that the annual flooding never caused destruction of homes or the loss of life, leaves me trusting water. Sure, some crops would be lost and cows needed to be rounded up to safe, higher ground, and, on bad flood years, some roads needed maintenance work when the floodwaters receded. Still, for me, water is powerful and trustworthy.

For someone else with different experiences, water might be seen as dangerous and untrustworthy.

The same sort of thing can be said about the earth. If you've lived through a major earthquake, maybe the rumble of a train going by might evoke a burst of adrenaline in your body. If you've lost your home to a fire, the image of a fire, even in a fireplace, might make you nervous.

The air, on the other hand – what's not to trust about the air? Well, if you're asthmatic, you might answer that question with, "plenty." A high pollen count or high particulate matter count might make the air an enemy. And if you're a fish, to come out of the water into the air might be suffocating. And if you're someone who grew up in Tornado Alley and watched the whirlwind tear apart your neighbor's home or your own home, maybe you don't think of the air as trustworthy.

The trustworthiness of the air is important for agriculture. For example, Washington dryland wheat farmers rely on the rains and snows coming in predictable patterns to grow their crops. Indian agriculture relies on the monsoon season bring enough, but not too much, rain, and not all at once. Both of these patterns are being altered by climate change.

Tropical storms, typhoons, and hurricanes carry much more water than they used to, are wider than they used to be, and cause greater storm surge along the coast – because of climate change. This past week, super typhoon Ragasa pummeled remote islands in the

Philippines, killed at least 14 and caused major flooding in Taiwan, and caused almost 2 million people to evacuate from coastal regions in mainland China.¹ And now it's heading to Vietnam.

I wonder if farmers especially and people in general around the globe are feeling like the air is less trustworthy. We may want to blame the air, to think that the air has become treacherous. But it's our own doing. Before the industrial age, levels of CO₂ in the atmosphere were around 280ppm. 0.028% of the molecules in the air were carbon dioxide. They are now over 425ppm – and rising.² While that's still a minuscule percentage of the molecules in the air, it is also 50% more. And – so delicate is the balance of nature – that change is enough to disrupt climates and make the air seem untrustworthy.

The story of Job begins with the air acting capriciously. Calamity after calamity befalls Job and his wife. (I wish there was a companion book in the Bible that told the story from her point of view.) Foreign soldiers kidnapped Job's brother's family, slaughtering their servants. A wildfire killed Job's sheep and servants. Another foreign adversary raided and stole Job's camel herd. All of that is bad.

And then a great wind came in from the desert and destroyed Job's eldest son's house, the house where all Job's children had gathered. When the house collapsed, it crushed and killed all his children.

Job and his wife are left alone. Their fortune stolen or destroyed. Their household servants killed, except for the handful who survived to make their reports. And all their children are dead. I wonder if Job's relationship with the air changed. That wind. That wind that came and killed his children – could he trust the air again?

The book of Job uses Hebrew words that are translated into English as 'wind' or 'whirlwind' some twenty times. The word that gets translated this way most frequently is 'ruach,' a word that can also be translated as 'breath' or 'spirit.' (This is the same word that's used in the first creation story, when the wind/spirit from God sweeps over the deep.) "Turbulent, world-shaping air is a central character in Job," writes Dr. Adam White, "not an uncredited extra. Job is the most air obsessed text in the Christian Canon."³

In this one book of the Bible, "the wind separates that which is secure from that which is easily swept away (Job 21:18). It exposes that which is substantial and that which is merely 'hot air' (Job 16:3). It scatters that which is gathered (Job 27:21). It brings the changing of the seasons (Job 37:17)."⁴ And wind carries God's response to Job's complaint (Job 38:1).

¹ Jessie Yeung, Wayne Chang, and Laura Sharman, "Nearly 2 million evacuated as Ragasa slams into southern China, after killing at least 14 in Taiwan," *CNN*, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/09/23/asia/typhoon-ragasa-hong-kong-southern-china-impact-intl-hnk> (posted 24 September 2025; accessed 27 September 2025).

² Owen Mulhern, "A Graphical History of Atmospheric CO₂ Levels Over Time," *Earth.Org*, https://earth.org/data_visualization/a-brief-history-of-co2/ (posted 26 August 2025; accessed 27 September 2025).

³ Adam White, "If I Were Preaching," part of the *Grounded In Creation* worship series resources from Church Anew.

⁴ *Ibid.*

After these disasters befall Job and his wife, Job still worships God. He says, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21). And then Job’s health is affected. Sores cover his body, and he can find no relief.

Friends come to sit with him in his suffering and they have a discussion. For 35 chapters that talk about Job’s suffering and its cause. Surely God must be punishing Job, but Job can’t think of how he might have sinned. Finally, Job starts asking, “Why? If you are a just God, why am I suffering?”

And finally, God answers, and the answer comes out of a whirlwind. God doesn’t explain why. God simply reminds Job that God is God and Job is not. And Job is humbled, and praises God.

“When air is heavy and turbulent, its power is unmistakable,” writes Dr. White. “In the biblical imagination, air, breath, spirit, and wind are primordial animating forces. They move, change, shape, and destroy. They bring death and life.”⁵

The air brings life in our reading from Ezekiel. The passage is set in the context of devastation. The Babylonian empire has conquered Israel and sent the leaders into exile. Ezekiel’s people have lost the grounding signs of God’s presence: the land, the temple, and the monarchy. They’re in a theological crisis, having lost the anchors for their relationship with God. This experience of exile pushes them to question the validity of their conceptualizations of God and how God deals with people.⁶

How could God allow this disaster to occur? Where is God in the midst of this devastation and loss? These are familiar questions.

The first half of the book of Ezekiel contains one answer to these questions. The prophet’s oracles and visions and actions explain that the people are rebellious and at fault. It is their disobedience that has led to this unfortunate moment.

In the second half of the book, the prophet turns to consolation and oracles of promise. “Ezekiel’s vision of a valley of dry bones is one of these places of promise within the book. The prophet is brought to a valley, a low place filled with bones. In this vision, these dry bones represent the people in exile (verse 11). They feel like dry, hopeless, weary people in a foreign land. But God does not leave them as dry bones!”⁷ God covers these bones with tendons and muscles, and covers them with skin. They look human again, but they aren’t alive. They need the breath, the wind, the spirit – the ruach.

And Ezekiel calls forth God’s winds from the four directions, and it enters them, and they become alive again.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Tyler Mayfield, “Commentary on Ezekiel 37:1-14,” Working Preacher, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-ezekiel-37-1-14-11> (posted 26 March 2023; accessed 22 September 2025).

The vision serves as a promise to God's people that they will be restored. God will take the dry bones of their desolation and create a new future – a future with God's spirit within.⁸

The faithful life is not without its serious challenges. As true as that is, the theologian Dr. Tyler Mayfield warns those of us with privilege, "we do not want to overestimate our sorrow either."⁹ As a White Christian American, I am not persecuted by my government or society – at least not yet. The more Christo-Nationalism takes root, the more important it is that I live out my progressive, inclusive Christianity, and the more likely it is that my progressive, inclusive Christianity will be deemed "wrong" and I will become part of a persecuted religious minority. Still, I must be careful that I don't always see myself in the role of exile, "especially when we may need to look at ourselves as the oppressor who contributes to others' exile.

"The prophetic vision intervenes in this depressing situation with good news: God brings life from death. God restores the broken!

"God does not leave us where we are. God is present with us in the struggle....

"Ezekiel's vivid vision of transformation provides hope in the middle of a complex and painful calamity. Dry bones are not the last word."¹⁰

So, spend some time noticing the air today. Don't be a fish that doesn't know it's wet. Become aware of the fluid in which we live and move.

Use your senses to become aware of the air. Feel it moving against your skin. Take a deep breath through your mouth and exhale through your nose – and notice if you taste anything. Notice smells the air carries – and how those smells make you feel. Listen to the noises the air carries to you. Look at the air and notice that you can't see it – unless it's filled with pollutants or saturated with water vapor.

The air reminds us that God is God. The air reminds us that dry bones don't have the last word. And the air reminds us of the Spirit's presence. Like the Spirit, sometimes the air is our calm, invisible, ever-present companion. At other times, like the Spirit, it whips around in a way that invites fall leaves to bravely let go. Like the Spirit, the air wakes us up and enlivens us.

Amen.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*