
BREATHE

EZEKIEL 37:1-4

**A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON EASTER SUNDAY, MAY 23, 2021,
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You never forget when breath is knocked out of you. Almost 40 years ago, I was playing little league baseball for North Dade Optimist in Miami, Florida. I was on the Padres team. I was up to bat. I hit the ball and it was a good enough hit to be a double. I ran down to first base, then turned to hustle toward second base. I slid feet first into second and was called safe by the umpire. But I felt anything but safe, because I had the breath knocked out of me. I couldn't breathe due to the impact of my back on the ground when I was sliding into second base. I remember standing to my feet, bending over and not being able to breathe, and grabbing the umpire's leg for help. You never forget.

Eventually, my breath came back but in those split seconds, rather than breath, it felt like death. Have you ever had the breath knocked out of you? Then you know what I'm talking about. You never forget what it feels like when your breath is gone. You never forget, if you live to tell it, when you can't breathe.

We may take it for granted but breath is life. The breath of God, the Spirit of God, is life. And on this Pentecost, we are faced with a stark prominent image of death in Ezekiel—dem bones dem bones dem dry bones. "...he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry." The spirit of the Lord, the spirit of life, leads Ezekiel to the valley of dry bones, to the place of contamination and death, not away from it, but to it. To the bones. Bones express physical and spiritual debility (Isaiah 66:14; Job 21:24) and it was believed that one could be contaminated by coming into contact with the dead (Num.19:16-18; 2 Kings 23:14, 16; Ezek. 39:15-16). Ezekiel is in a haunted cemetery, threatened by death, but obviously like the ghostbusters he ain't afraid of no ghost. There's even talk about "slain" people and "graves," assuring us that this scene is one of lifelessness, breathlessness, and hopelessness.

The vast devastation of bones represents "the whole house of Israel" and they say, "our hope is lost." They're in exile because they defiled the temple, ignored the holy nature of God's sanctuary, the glory of God is removed from Jerusalem, and the city of Jerusalem even falls. No wonder their hope was lost and the breath was knocked out of them. No wonder they are like dem bones, a sea of ghostly death, due to the absence of God in their lives.

But sometimes, often times, the Spirit wants to break out in places where we think there is no hope, where we see no possibility, where we feel no breath. God specializes in things thought impossible! In so many ways, we've been in a valley of dry bones during this global pandemic and we may have asked that question over and over again, "Can these bones live?" Will we rise after so many deaths, after so many bones have decayed all over the world due to COVID-19? Will we live again? Will we rise after church doors being closed for so long? Will we breathe again? It's strange to think or speak about breath while wearing masks to prevent us from breathing on each other!

But we need breath. We need to breathe in order to live. And Pentecost is about breath. Archer Boyette received a Master of Fine Arts degree in Experimental and Documentary Arts from Duke this year. She created a multimedia installation that connects analog, digital, sculptural and sonic elements to celebrate plant life and build what she calls "a space of environmental reverence." All of the plant life is from the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. What drew my attention to this installation is her title for it: "we breathe each other in and out of existence." When she was interviewed about this work, she said: "On the surface, we breathe each other in and out of existence seems like a grandiose or lofty statement, but it's really just fundamentally true. It's a fact, our interdependence with plants and our connectedness. We literally facilitate each other's breath."

We need to breathe in order to live. And Pentecost is about breath, God's breath. Just as prominent as the images of death in Ezekiel is the language of breath. There is death all around in the valley and in the Holy Land and there is breath all around, too. In the valley of dry bones, there's life, the source of life, specifically the Hebrew word for "spirit," "breath," or "wind" (*ruach*). It occurs ten times and it's the main theological motif for Ezekiel. Repeatedly, we hear "I will put my breath in you." I will put my spirit in you. Like the day of Pentecost, the Spirit will fall on you, fill you, ignite you, in an upper room or in a lower valley. But if you aren't ready to face bones of death, you aren't ready to encounter the spirit of life because this is where the breath of God works—in domains of death like a global pandemic.

The feast of Pentecost, the celebration of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit of life on the early church, is the culmination of the Easter season in the liturgical calendar. That means that the Spirit of Pentecost, the Breath of Pentecost, that is blown to the ends of the earth by God, even in valleys, is the Spirit of the resurrection and Easter hope. Resurrection power is Pentecostal power that's unleashed like dynamite in the world by the Spirit, the breath of God. The same breath that raised Jesus is the same breath that is blowing in the world now among bones and our lives and at our baptism. So we shouldn't be surprised that the majority of the time when Ezekiel mentions 'breath' or 'spirit', he follows it by saying "you shall live" (vv. 5,6,14), or "they may live" (v. 9), or "they lived" (v. 10). For where there is breath, there is life.

And in the Spirit, this life is nothing less than resurrection. God breathes life back into this ancient community and raises it from its graves. There was just an empty shell of bones connected to bones with sinews and flesh and skin until the breath or spirit of life was breathed into these once dead people (vv. 9-10). It's a reenactment of the primal act of creation, when God formed humanity from the dust of the ground and breathed into their nostrils the breath of life (Gen. 2:7). The very many dry bones were "lying in the valley" (v. 2), but because the breath of God came into them, the "vast multitude" eventually "stood on their feet" (v. 10). God says, "I am going to open your graves and bring you up from your graves....and you shall live." They were down but when breath came, they got up.

I may not know many things (as my family can tell you) but I know God wants *us* fully alive. I say 'us' because this experience of resurrection in Ezekiel is collective or communal. It is not individual. Just like the interconnectivity of our breath, "the bones [plural] came *together*, bone to its bone," the toe bone's connected to the foot bone, the foot bone's connected to the ankle bone, the ankle bone's connected to the leg bone; what kind of bone are you? You get the picture. And on the day of Pentecost in Acts, they were *all together* in one place. The vast multitude stood on their feet and rose out of their graves. The spirit raises a people, a community. And we are linked bone to bone, breath to breath, heart to heart, mask to mask, with the realization, hopefully, that what affects one, affects all. And God wants us *all* fully alive. So he breathes on bones that all may rise together to experience the restoration of collective hope.

As a people, as a church, as the body of Christ, there are many, as we come through this pandemic, that are worried about the future of the church and how will it be post-pandemic. I'm not worried because the future of the church is in God's hands and God's resurrection breath is our victorious ventilator. The church will live on because God is alive and breathing, but it may look different in the future as we rise out of the ashes of COVID-19. But even as we come out of this valley, I take heart in trusting that the breath of God is still blowing among us. Today, we're all excited about a reopening of a building and I love it, but I'm even more excited about resurrection.

"It is the extra breath from the exhausted lung, the one more thing to try when all else has failed, the upward reach of life when weariness closes in upon all endeavor... the incentive to carry on when times are out of joint and men and women have lost their reason, the source of confidence when worlds crash and dreams whiten into ash." Such is the growing edge! (Howard Thurman). Such is the resurrection, that while it was still dark, God raised Jesus from the dead with all of his bones intact. Resurrection is all around. Breath is all around. Sometimes it may seem as if the bones and death will win but the prophetic promise from the valley of dry bones is that even death is no match for divine breath.

But keep in mind that resurrection is gradual. Remember that as Ezekiel “prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. [He] looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them.” No breath in them. No life in them at that point. This was the starting point of resurrection when they were only an empty shell, so resurrection takes time, and though we might want to rush it, even Jesus knew it could take three days. We can’t rush or force God’s breath, because we are not God, the source of breath.

So we’ll have to be patient as God’s Spirit blows new life among our bones. And God will do it because God wants us fully alive out of our graves. God’s breath is vital for our future, yet we are still called to use our breath to speak even though we don’t know the results like Ezekiel—“O Lord God you know.” We may not be the source of breath but we are still stewards of breath, so keep prophesying, keep preaching, keep teaching, keep speaking, keep singing, keep praying, keep encouraging, keep breathing, even when you don’t see the results of your labor. Like Ezekiel, we co-labor with God in the ministry of resurrection. We are stewards of breath.

So let us say to the Breath as we swing wide open the doors of our hearts in this new season:

*Breathe on me, breath of God;
fill me with life anew,
that I may love as you have loved
and do as you would do.*

*Breathe on me, breath of God;
so shall I never die,
but live with you the perfect life
of your eternity.*

You might have had the breath knocked out of you but God wants to breathe the spirit of resurrection into you and make that wonderful promise, “You shall live.” May we all live in the days, months, and years ahead. May we all breathe in and out the Spirit of life in this community and may every breath remind us how close resurrection truly is.