
BREATH AND BONES

EZEKIEL 37:1-14

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

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It was 1974 on 216 Street in Bronx, NY. A little baby boy was resting in his mother's arms one afternoon. He was the last of five children. Everything was fine that afternoon until my mother looked at me in her arms and noticed that my skin color had changed to a blueish purple. That color is never a good sign unless you're a Disney character. I struggled to physically breathe and convulsed due to a very high fever. And then I stopped breathing. You don't realize how important breath is until you lose it, until the wind is knocked out of you and you can't catch your breath. The truth is some never do. As I stopped breathing in my mother's arms, my second oldest 12-year-old brother had just returned home from school. He saw what was happening and called my father on the phone and said while crying, "Luke is dead. Luke is dead." There are some messages you never want to receive as a parent and that is one of them. What my brother saw in that moment was no breath. He saw my body but there was no breath; no breath means no life. No breath means death. I had flesh and skin and sinews but there was no breath in me and all my brother could say was "Luke is dead." No breath is death.

This is what happened to Jesus at the end of his life on the cross. We hear in the Gospel of Mark that he "let out a loud cry and breathed his last" (Mark 15:37). He gave up his spirit, his breath, and what came was death. This happens in our time as well. This happened to Eric Garner in New York City, the man tackled by police officers, and put in a chokehold while being arrested, only to suffocate, and as he died, he said, "I can't breathe." No breath means death. You don't realize how important breath is until you lose it.

Think about it. Breath is so critical for life. From the very beginning, the spirit, the wind, the breath of God hovered over the face of the waters at creation. Breath means life. So if breath is vital for life, why does the breath, the spirit, of the Lord bring Ezekiel to a valley of very many dry bones, a vast domain of death and contamination? Shouldn't the Spirit cause us to run away from death and hardships and protect us from pain? Doesn't God want life for us, not death, so why does the breath, the spirit of the Lord plop mortal Ezekiel among the dead? Breath means life but the breath, the spirit, of God, here, leads to a place of death.

Maybe the spirit of the Lord sets Ezekiel down in the middle of a valley that is full of bones to keep him honest about the dry bones of exilic reality and to face the truth. Just as the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness, the Spirit, the breath, of God leads Ezekiel to a valley of death. Make no bones about it, the Spirit is not only linked to joy and celebration but to sorrow and lamentation. God tells Ezekiel that the "bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.'" This is the lamenting voice of exilic existence and the Spirit is not afraid to confront it head on and to lead us to see the truth. Too often, as my Duke colleague Ed Balleisen reveals in his book on the American history of fraud, the United States has been a place where deception in the business sector has thrived historically and we are prone to follow the deception and lies. But the breath, the spirit, of God will not have any of that and doesn't want us to be deceived in the life of faith but to know the truth. The Spirit doesn't just move in upper rooms but in lonesome valleys too, and this is also a part of the life of faith in the power of the Spirit.

The spirit keeps us honest about histories and actualities of hardship so that we don't avoid tough times and aim for a struggle-free life when in reality many are hopeless and feel cut off. In many ways as a Christian, you have to die before you live. That's the truth. 'Come and die' is the call of Christ to us. The spirit, the breath of God, will not allow Ezekiel to be dead to reality, the reality of death all around, but wants him alive to the many dry bones lying all around. Alive to the truth!

And without a doubt, death is all around, even in El Paso, Texas, and Dayton, Ohio, where we had two mass shootings in less than 24 hours. Ezekiel is in the middle of a valley and it was full of bones. He's surrounded by death on every side. The bones of death are the most prominent image in this passage. They appear to be

dominant and victorious. There are “very many.” They are “very dry” and this valley is “full of bones.” The bones can’t be missed. They are the image of the death of a people. The bones represent a death even as Ezekiel speaks of “graves,” and the “slain.” And to encounter the bones of the dead, historically, meant to risk contamination (Ezek. 39:15-16; cf. Num. 19:16-18). We can’t help but hear the Spiritual, “Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones/Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones/Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones/Now hear the word of the Lord.” Dem bones are the most obvious part of reality. They are everywhere in the valley yet breath fearlessly encounters them and wants us to do the same in faith—and to see the truth. This passage is perfect for poet Emily Dickinson who wrote:

*Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –*

The truth is that in a valley of dry bones resurrections don’t come easily. It can take three days or 40 days or 40 years or much longer but you have to go through death in order to reach life. Something has to die in order for something new to rise. There’s a crucifixion before a resurrection. The truth of the matter is that there’s a struggle between breath and bones, life and death, and often we are caught in between. There’s a dock in Lakeside Chautauqua, Ohio, that goes out into Lake Erie. Standing on that dock, when the wind is blowing, there can easily be rough waters and waves on one side of the dock, while the other side of the dock, the waters remain calm, and there you stand in the middle, between calm and chaos, life and death, breath and bones. On the same dock, on the same day, we can celebrate a life and the successful work of someone and then find ourselves lamenting a death of someone else a few hours later. There’s an ongoing struggle between breath and bones, life and death.

These bones are visible and material realities and there are very many. So often, they seem to be more real than breath, which is invisible and immaterial, so it can be hard to discern when and where the breath is blowing. There’s a wrestling between life and death and at times, we can be unsure if life will win. This struggle becomes even clearer when you realize that the word ‘bones’ are mentioned ten times and the word ‘spirit’ or ‘breath’ is mentioned ten times as well in this passage. The bones threaten breath with death, while the breath threatens the bones with resurrection.

In this struggle, even when we are on the brink of resurrection when God is about to open up our graves and open us up to new life, we may find ourselves in what I call the zombie zone. At one point, Ezekiel “prophesied as he had been commanded; and as he 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.” Don’t be naïve and think resurrections can be rushed. They can’t and only God knows if the bones can live.

The truth is that sometimes what may occur in life is only a semblance of resurrection and not the real thing because there’s no breath, no life, in them, and all we have is a zombie shell. So you can have flesh, sinews, skin, bones, and still be dead. You can show up for church and still be dead. You can have a loving family and still be dead. You can have a great job and still be dead. In an organization, there might be well-manicured structures and systems in place but still no spirit breathing life into it. It could be governmental agencies, nonprofits, churches, schools or other groups. A public educational system can be in place but certain schools still lack the resources to provide proper and adequate education to young people; this is a system or structure but there’s no breath in it. When a prison system becomes a huge profit-making business rather than aim to restore human beings to society, there is no breath in it. It’s a reminder that resurrection is on God’s watch and only God knows how and when it will happen. No breath, however, is death, even if you have flesh, sinews, skin, and bones connecting to bones. This is still the zombie zone.

This is just the truth about the valley of dry bones and the Spirit of the Lord placed Ezekiel right in this valley. The honesty of the Spirit leads Ezekiel to see the truth about life and to say the truth about life. When the Lord asks him “Can these bones live?” he doesn’t try to put up a front and appear to be really spiritual and full of faith without doubts of any kind and sound real holy and declare ‘of course, God, these bones can live!’ Rather, he says humbly, “O Lord God, you know.” “O Lord God, you know.” Ezekiel is so honest! And we need more honesty in the life of faith. Honest about what he knows and doesn’t know. He doesn’t make up an answer but

shows us what is true about so many things in the Christian life. “O Lord God, you know, why my family member got cancer. O Lord God, you know, why that student committed suicide. O Lord God, you know, when a change will come in this relationship. O Lord God, you know, when we’ll get out of this valley of dry bones. O Lord God, you know, how these mass shootings will stop and when this nation will actually do something about them. O Lord God, you know, what the future of this nation will be. O Lord God, you know, when resurrection will come or if it will come. O Lord God, you know!” This is intellectual and spiritual humility, and the one thing we do know is God knows. That’s the truth! And Ezekiel speaks it.

And even though it’s true that God knows whether the bones can live, we are still called to serve, to work, to speak, to breathe, even if we don’t know how it will all turn out or when it will turn or when resurrection will happen. To say “O Lord God, you know” doesn’t let Ezekiel off the hook and isn’t an escape hatch for inactivity. God puts him to work! God tells Ezekiel right after he says, “O Lord God, you know,” “Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.” Then later, God tells him to prophesy to the breath and the people of Israel. Though we may not know if the bones can live or understand how it all will work out, our limited human knowledge doesn’t stop God from calling us to serve, to work, to do good in the world, and continue to be as faithful as possible in word and deed to the gospel of Christ. God still calls us to prophesy and to be agents of hope, even in a valley of dry bones. We’re called to be stewards of words and stewards of breath, blowing life wherever we go, declaring like Ezekiel “you shall live.”

God only knew what would happen in 1974 when the ambulance came and took my mother and me to the hospital while my father rushed to meet us there. My brother had already told my father that I was dead. But God knew. At some point between our departure to the hospital and while there, a neighbor came upstairs in our duplex on 216th Street to see what the noise was all about. She had heard a lot of movement above her on her ceiling. When she arrived upstairs, she discovered that the noise she heard was that of my four siblings—ages 14, 12, 8, and 4—pacing the floor, praying for breath to enter me again. The noise she heard was the pacing of little praying feet. My life was touched by death and prayers for breath as an infant. At some point, the doctors used a bucket of ice to breathe life back into me. God only knows how all of this happened. “O Lord God, you know.” But I thank God that others went to work, including my siblings. I thank God for breath amid death. I thank God that there were stewards of breath in Bronx, NY. You don’t realize how important breath is until you lose it.

You may be without breath this morning but God knows that you will eventually live because in God, life is the goal, and it may take time, God’s time, and one may have to go through a valley of dry bones to reach the promised land. Yet, there will be open graves in your future because not even death can stop the breath of God from inspiring resurrections. Bones will live again. The breath of God will breathe again. How and when, only God knows.