

Dry Bones

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Have you ever thought about your breath? About how you breathe? Every time we inhale, our diaphragms contract and move downwards so there is room for our lungs to expand. Air is pulled into the lungs, and oxygen gets into the blood. Carbon dioxide then fills the lungs and is forced out when we exhale. Given that the average person takes 25000 breaths a day, it's amazing we don't think about breathing that much.

Usually, if we think about breathing, it's when we're having trouble doing it. Maybe the pollen is in the air and your allergies are acting up. Maybe you've got asthma, and you wonder if you need to pull out your inhaler. Maybe it was hearing about ventilators and ECMO machines and how those afflicted with serious cases of COVID-19 needed machines to help them breathe.

But we also know that when we are mindful about our breathing, that helps us in many ways. It can help lower our pulse and blood pressure. It can calm us, help us to pause.

In the Old Testament lesson for today, God shows the prophet Ezekiel a vision that dramatically shows how important breath is. It's one of the most famous visions in the Bible. The vision begins with a valley of dry bones, but ends with them alive again, filled with the breath of God.

In order to keep your lungs healthy, you have to do certain things. You have to exercise, especially aerobic exercise. You have to keep stuff that could harm your lungs out of them, which is why smoking bans exist and why people wore masks even before the pandemic to help with allergies or as protection against air pollution. You have to make sure you don't try to breathe and eat or drink at the same time.

You have to avoid letting yourself get too sick and catch pneumonia.

Spiritually, we do things that harm us too. We breathe in from the culture around us, and get filled with the wrong things. We breathe in cries for personal responsibility, but forget about loving our neighbors as ourselves. We breathe in the need for more stuff and keeping up with the Joneses, instead of being content with what we have. We breathe in opinions that agree with our preconceptions, and forget about learning and connecting with those who think differently than we do. Our calendars are filling up again after being emptied last year, but leave us feeling drained.

Israel had been breathing in the wrong things. It had kept God's breath out of their lives. Their idolatry had finally caught up with them, and they'd been taken into exile, just as the prophets had warned would happen. Their march across the desert had made them lose their breath. They couldn't see any chance of new life. All they could see was the end of their old life.

Ezekiel was forced to take a good look at the situation as God shows him this vision. It's hard to avoid the consequences of sin when walking through a valley of dry bones, of those who died because of their sin. It's hard to avoid the consequences of sin with death and destruction all around. It's hard to avoid the consequences of sin when it looks like the end.

But that wasn't the end. God spoke. God commanded Ezekiel to speak. God commanded Ezekiel to speak to over the bones, speak the word of God to them. And the bones rattled and shook and came together. They got reconnected with tendons and muscle and skin. But God wasn't done yet.

God didn't just recreate the bodies. He bought them to life. God commanded Ezekiel to speak to the wind, to the breath. Ezekiel did, and the breath entered the bodies, and there was life.

And this is where we get a brief vocabulary lesson. Spirit and breath and wind are the same word in Hebrew, ruach. And that can get confusing in some passages like this, when we can wonder or look from English translation to English translation and see if something is translated wind or breath or spirit. But it also reminds us that the spirit of God is what brings life. The Spirit of God is what makes the dry bones walk. God's word and God's spirit come together, and bring new life.

The Word and the Spirit bring life where there was only death. When Israel mourned and lamented in exile, the Spirit breathed new life into them like a wind animating a valley of dry bones. When they felt abandoned, God showed he would not leave them.

Today is Pentecost, the day we focus on the work of the Holy Spirit, who appears as wind and flames of fire. We often think that the great miracle of Pentecost is that the apostles were able to speak in different languages. But the greater miracle is that they were outside speaking where people could hear them! The same disciples who had hidden in the upper room with the doors locked for fear that those who had killed Jesus would kill them too, were now, less than two months later, speaking boldly and courageously out in public. They took deep breaths then pointed everyone to Jesus and what he had just done on the cross.

The Spirit continues to be breathed out into us. As we hear God's Word, as we gather together to praise God, the Holy Spirit is at work in us. This still takes place today when we are bone tired, out of breath and tongue-tied in our prayers. Whenever we experience emptiness,

God breathes new life into our bodies and fills us with the Spirit from on high

It may look like we're looking out at a valley of dry bones as we look into the world. Church attendance was dropping before the pandemic, and the return to worship hasn't been as fast or as large as many hoped. More and more people are spiritual, but not religious. More and more people are turning away from God to follow greed and pride and lust. It looks like we can only see a valley of dry bones.

Yet we worship a God who can breathe life into dry bones. We tend to overestimate what we can do in the short term, and underestimate what God can do in the long term. Looking out over a valley of dry bones, we can think all hope is lost. But God is bigger than that.

As G.K. Chesterton said, "Christendom has had a series of revolutions and in each one of them Christianity has died. Christianity has died many times and risen again; for it had a God who knew the way out of the grave." God knows the way out of the grave. God knows how to bring life where we see only death. God knows how to bring words when we run out of words. God knows how to let us take a breath, and relax.

Breathing is a big deal, and today God calls us all to receive the breath of new life, the Holy Spirit. In God there is a breath for the weary and heavy-laden, for the crushed in spirit, for the despised and lowly. The breath he gives enters into the deepest dryness of your life and revitalizes who you are beyond all understanding. Yes, in Jesus is a breath of life that extends even beyond the grave.

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Pentecost Sunday
May 23, 2021