

## “Breathfully Alive”

Rev. Clinton G. Roberts – Ezekiel 37:1-10 – Pentecost Sunday – May 23, 2021

First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest, IL

There’s something so fundamental about breathing...simply breathing. Yet most of us go through our day unaware of our breath, until we can’t catch it. Then it becomes everything.

Riding a bike is all about the breath. Your legs move the bike and your heart pumps the blood that delivers the oxygen you need for your calves and your quads to work. And then you hit the bottom of that steep, hard climb, and as your knees take the strain, your weight becomes painfully clear to you. You gear down and speed up your cadence, stretching your lungs with each inhalation, breathing faster and harder and deeper. Your heart, muscles and bones are all working. But without the breath, that bike isn’t going anywhere-and neither are you.

I was at my desk at the little church we served back in Kansas one sunny, Saturday morning back in the Eighties, writing my sermon while my young son was playing outside my window. He suddenly ran into my office in a panic, his little face turning blue, clawing at his throat in silence. He wasn’t breathing! I shot out of my chair, compressing his diaphragm with the swift, sudden jerks of the Heimlich Maneuver I learned in the restaurant business. On the third try there was a gurgling sound, followed by a long, ragged intake of air. My son was breathing again! He deposited the culprit in my outstretched hand: a sour-ball of hard candy his dotting grandfather had given him unthinkingly. Breathing is everything. And it took me a few minutes before my own heart stopped pounding—and I was able to catch my own.

We remember our children’s first breath, don’t we? And some of us can also remember our parents’ or partners’ last, as we kept vigil by their bedsides, and just listened to them breathe...

The breath is so basic—and so fundamental to our living—that in the ancient Hebrew, it means not one, but three things at once. *Ruach*, they name it: the wind; the spirit; and the breath.

In the Book of Genesis, it states that at the beginning of Creation, *“a wind from God swept across the face of the water.”* Another translation says, *“the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the deep,”* and yet another, *“the breath of God hovered over the surface of the waters.”* All three translations are correct. *Ruach*. In the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Book of John, the Risen Christ breathes upon his disciples saying, *“Receive the Holy Spirit.”* And in the Book of Ezekiel, our text for this Pentecost Sunday, God says to this exiled priest of the Temple, *“Prophecy to the breath.”*

The Book of Ezekiel, which is 48 chapters long, is, after Isaiah and Jeremiah, the third-longest book of the Prophets. Ezekiel lived during the seventh and sixth centuries before Christ, when the tiny kingdom of Judah was in its death-throes, and the Babylonian Exile was beginning. It is Jeremiah that captured the agony of this period in Israel's history, from the dashed hopes for renewal embodied by young King Josiah and his Deuteronomic reforms, his tragic death at Megiddo, trying to defend his nation against the incursion of Pharaoh Necho's army in 609, the vacillating diplomacy of his two successors Jehoiakim and Jehoiachin, resulting in the capitulation of Jerusalem in 597 and its utter destruction eleven years later by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Ezekiel was part of the first Deportation, taken into Exile along with Judah's political and military elite as one of the leading priests of the Temple. His ministry takes place in Babylon and is directed to the Exilic Community of Jews living in and around the capital city along the banks of the Euphrates. Scholars believe that Ezekiel's residence was in Tell-Abib, a settlement near ancient Nippur, downstream from Babylon along the Chebar canal that connected to the River. This is the site of the valley mentioned in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Ezekiel, where his vision of the dry bones takes place.

But Ezekiel's vision could have taken place anywhere, because it is "the spirit of the Lord," we are told, that brought him out of his house and set him down in that valley. The vision he is about to see, we are told in verse 11 of our passage, "are the bones of the whole house of Israel," the Northern and Southern Kingdoms alike. It is a valley that is full of bones: a landscape of defeat, of hopelessness—and death. And if that were not enough, we are told that the bones "are very dry." They are old bones! Desiccated bones. The ancient Hebrews believed that the bones were the seat of the soul in a human being: the place of power and structure and strength. You've all heard people say, "he's lacking in backbone." That meaning goes back a long, long way.

But these bones are completely, soulless: dried-up and empty of marrow, like the nation they represent. Then God quietly says to Ezekiel, "*Can these bones live?*" You know, when God starts asking questions in Scripture, it's a really good idea to start listening—and pay close attention to what happens next! Here are some memorable examples:

"*Where are You?*" God called out to Adam in the Garden of Eden.

"*What are you doing here?*" God asks Elijah as he stands at the entrance to his cave.

"*Why do you look for the living among the dead?*" asked God's angels to the women who came to the tomb on Easter. And now, "*Son of man, can these bones live?*"

I've known many people who carry whole boneyards around inside them: boneyards of lost dreams and broken hopes, lost opportunities, ongoing bitterness, valleys of depression and dry gulches of grief. The bones represent all that once was strongly alive in them. Now they serve as a painful reminder of what once was living but now is dead. Thomas Wolfe put it this way in his book, "Look Homeward, Angel:" *Lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again.* Many of the people you may encounter on any given day may be hopelessly walking through boneyards of despair and desolation like this. And Ezekiel is certainly among that number.

But then God says to Ezekiel, "*Prophecy to the bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.*" "Can dry bones really hear anything?" you may be asking yourself, but these bones not only hear the word of the Lord—they also move in response! Knocking themselves together! Bone to bone to bone! Can't you hear Franz Liszt's "Dance Macabre" playing in your head right now?

I know some people who act like those dry bones in the Valley. They hear the word of the Lord. And they may even go through the motions: going to church, giving to charity, trying to be a good person. But something essential is missing. Something essential as breath.

In the Book of Ezekiel, the word of the Lord has power to reverse the natural order of death and decomposition, clothing the bleached bones in that Valley with flesh and blood again. Yet a second word is needed: "*Prophecy to the breath,*" says God to Ezekiel, "*and say to the breath...Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.*" In the Book of Genesis, God makes the first man out of dirt. But Adam doesn't stand up until the Lord God breathes into his nostrils the breath of life. "*I prophesied as God commanded me,*" said Ezekiel, "*and the spirit came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.*"

Here we can see the connection with Adam. And with the disciples in that locked room on that very first Easter. But there is a third connection: with the General Resurrection on the Last Day from the Book of Revelation. Ezekiel's vision is a preview of that.

There is an ancient prayer for Pentecost that goes like this: *Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of the faithful, and kindle in them the fire of your love.* Is your life in need of re-kindling this morning? Well, the Spirit of God is the flame. *Send forth Your Spirit,* the prayer continues, *and you shall renew the face of the earth.* That's the kind of power Christ has promised to those who seek to obey his commandments and live in his love. And the promise is not only for us and for our children, but like Ezekiel's vision, it is meant for the church and for our nation as well. Some of us here are not only struggling through personal valleys of shadow: we're feeling like exiles in our own country, in a nation that resembles less and less the one we grew up in, believe in, and love. "*Can these bones live?*" is a question God may be asking all of us. The

vision of Ezekiel brings with it a witness to the resurrection for both our own lives and for our life together as a nation. And Pentecostal power, too, when we consider that the church, however beaten-down and beleaguered, has been, is now, and always will be the body of beloved believers for whom Christ died and for whom Christ has promised the gift of the Spirit: the Comforter, the Lord and Giver of Life. As St. Ambrose said, "*It is the prerogative of God to raise the dead.*" And Jesus himself assures us that nothing is impossible with God. So on this Pentecost, take hold of that truth and believe. Breathe in, and breathe out. And know that you too are cherished and beloved.

Rise up, People of God! *Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit! Prophecy to the breath!*

Yes, we are the old bones called to stand up this morning—for we are the Body of Jesus.

And we are breathfully alive!

Amen.