

Breath Deep
Jubilee Mennonite Church
April 2, 2017

Purpose: To remind us of God's life giving spirit moving in our midst.

Message: As People of faith we invited to look for the resurrecting realities in our midst

Scripture: Ezekiel 37:1-14 (I will read); John 11:1-45 [please read summary to be provided]
Psalm 130 Romans 8:6-11

Synopsis: How often do we look on the world and our lives and see situations that remain beyond hope? All too well we know how we encounter circumstances that seem beyond help. It may be the circumstances of our lives that are beyond our control and beyond our help. We so readily feel the absence of the holy in our lives lacking as we do a language of God that allows God to be both be good and to be in the pain in our lives. We look at the dry places of our lives, and we wonder whether life can be found there again. We want God to supply what we need, to compensate us for what we loose, to prevent us from pain and loss in the first place. But that is not what we get. Instead we get a God who can be present in all circumstance and bring about new life in it all. And that indeed is good.

Ezekiel 37:1-14 ^{NRS}

The hand of YHWH came upon me,
and brought me out by the spirit
and set me down in the middle of a valley;
it was full of bones.

² The Spirit led me all around them;
there were very many lying in the valley,
and they were very dry.

³ YHWH said to me,
"Mortal, can these bones live?"

I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know."

⁴ Then he said to me,
"Prophesy to these bones, and say to them:

O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.

⁵ Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones:
I will cause breath¹ to enter you,
and you shall live.

⁶ I will lay sinews on you,
and will cause flesh to come upon you,
and cover you with skin,
and put breath¹ in you, and you shall live;

and you shall know that I am the LORD."

⁷ So I prophesied as I had been commanded;
and as I prophesied,
suddenly there was a noise, a rattling,

and the bones came together, bone to its bone.

⁸ I 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.

⁹ Then YHWH said to me,

"Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal,
and say to the breath:

¹ Thus says the Lord GOD:
Come from the four winds, O breath,
² and breathe upon these slain,
that they may live."

¹⁰ I prophesied as he commanded me,
and the breath came into them,

and they lived,
and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

¹¹ Then YHWH said to me,

"Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel.
They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost;
we are cut off completely.'

¹² Therefore prophesy, and say to them,

Thus says the Lord GOD:

I am going to open your graves,
and bring you up from your graves,
O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³

And you shall know that I am the LORD,
when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves,
O my people.

¹⁴ I will put my spirit within you,
and you shall live,

and I will place you on your own soil;
then you shall know that I, the LORD,
have spoken and will act, says the LORD."

Can you imagine anything like this? It sounds like something out of Science Fiction—a valley full of dry, dusty, disconnected bones, waiting to be reconnected, re-organized and given new purpose. In the whole hall of fame of weird prophetic images, of which there are many, this one ranks right up there with living naked in a hole in the ground to tell Israel something about themselves and marrying a prostitute as a metaphor for the people of Israel. It would seem that there are no holds barred when it comes to speaking the word of the Lord. Everything is a metaphor and image, pointing to something else, meaning something other entirely. And while it might make a nice spiritual about the knee bone connecting to the leg bone and all the rest, it seems a bit of an image out of time and space.

As peculiar as it may be, I am not saying that Ezekiel was literally looking at a valley of dry bones. But that does not mean it is not real. It was real then and is real now. Ezekiel, you see, was a prophet and a priest right about when the Babylonians came to sack Jerusalem. He with the whole population of Israel were about to be carted off into exile indefinitely. Ezekiel was a contemporary of Jeremiah. He too had first hand knowledge of what it meant to be persecuted, cut off and isolated from all that made them who and what they were, what made them Jewish. So it is not terribly surprising that a promise of redemption for Israel takes the shape of a bunch of unavoidably dry bones.

Ezekiel knew the valley of Dry bones, and for many of us, so do we. We have all spent time here from time to time, where our lives, our hopes, seem beyond rescue, and our world has come apart at the seams. Some of us no doubt find ourselves there today. It is one of the most essential experiences of human experience, the experience of pain and desperation. Yet for all its universality, it is the most difficult places to be. Because each one's visit to this valley is unique. Each and every one of us come to this place convinced that we dwell there alone, convinced that we walk in the valley beyond any companionship, beyond any connection to those who are outside. There is nothing more isolating than the experience of pain, no matter what the source, and the best that we can do is try to find a way to put one foot in front of the other.

So what does this passage of historical prophecy have to say about our present deadly situations? Plenty, if we allow it to. Ezekiel is asked to prophecy, to pronounce God's seemingly impossible intention to people whose lives seem impossibly, improbably and unfalteringly broken. As the interchange between God and the prophet illustrates, I think even he had his doubts. "Mortal—can these bones yet live" asks God. "Only you know, Lord" he replies. Not exactly a ringing endorsement. I am willing to bet that this is far less a statement of confidence in the saving power of YHWH than it is a rather shrewd idea that it is a rather bad idea to laugh in the face of God. Because Ezekiel knows the world rather well, and by in large what has been brought low, and disassembled generally stays that way, no matter what.

We would so greatly prefer that God address the disconnected places of our lives by banishing them all together. We would have had the divine prerogative to simply skip this valley entirely, make it disappear from our lives entirely. We want a God who serves as a universal force field, keeping all that would cause us pain away from us, cushioning our losses, reversing our failures, rescuing us from the need to grieve at all. We might believe in the resurrecting power of God, but we certainly do not want to try it for ourselves. That would involve dying first, in big and small ways. And that is scary. And that is painful. Because when we walk through the valley of death, we know that we are going to lose something and that is the last thing that we want to do, even if we hold that God remains with us even there.

Doubtful though he may well be, Ezekiel prophecies to the bones. And they listen. They reassemble themselves, joint to joint, tendon to tendon. . The body, broken as it is brought back together, covered with muscle and tissue, all the stuff the body needs for us to function and to move. They were there, row upon row, reformed and recreated, ready and resurrected. But yet they are incomplete.

These bones, these people of Israel, these situations of deadly seriousness in our world and our time; where ever you wish to apply Ezekiel's imagery, can be pulled together, can be brought back to wholeness, to functionality, to fullness in the power of God and that in and of itself is a wonderful thing. But it is not enough. It is not quite life fully lived. It is not quite the reality fully restored. A quick Hebrew lesson; there is a word play in the Hebrew between

people and land. It is no accident that people (Adam in the ancient rendering) are created both in Genesis and here in Ezekiel are formed from the earth (adamah as the Hebrews would have it). Adam and adamah. Humanity is intrinsically and unalterable tied to earth, to land, to the good creation over which they are a part. They are one and the same. But they are not anything, they do not take on full life, full living until the wind blows the breath of God's spirit into their being and into their souls, which ties us too to the basic, elements of creative expression. Ezekiel calls to the wind (ruha') to fill us with breath (ruha again) of God's, you guessed it, ruha spirit. Same word. Same pronunciation. 3 uses. 3 meanings. And here you thought the Old Testament didn't have a sense of humor.

The point here is not for me to display some stupid Hebrew tricks. I want you to note the connections here, because they are important. This image of recreation is not a mere anatomy lesson. Its bigger than that. Its more important than that. The people who come from the earth walk the earth and fill the earth only because they are invested with the very spirit of God. We are created and filled with spirit, and we are made alive, even in the most deadly of circumstances, not just to be joints and muscles and matter moving about, but to live out and live within the very spirit of God in us and through us.

God does away with death not by making it disappear, but by going through it instead. We have a God who goes through the world as it is with us, around us, beside us, showing us by example that the only way to get to Easter is by going through Good Friday first. These bones can live, yes, and they will live, says God. But they will be changed, and moved, and reanimated with Spirit and hope along the way. Because the world created with all its frightful beauty, and present pain is infused with my spirit, and it is in that spirit that you will live, and move, and breath, and trust, and grow more and more into the image that I have planted inside you, even despite the pain that is now. Pain is real. Pain is present. Greif is overpowering. But they will not have the final say. They will not be all that there is. My breath will blow, my hope will rise, and the world will be made yet again.

God infuses the world with the spirit of the living God that holds nothing as beyond the pale, no situation as permanently broken, no place so devoid of spirit that God cannot blow even

still new life into the sagging sails. This is our promise and our proclamation: that resurrection rules the day. We are far more given to seeing the deathly problems in our midst and decry their existence and despair their hopelessness than to come together with Ezekiel and declare in valleys of death that their power is not for ever, that the abuse of power shall not last forever, but will be brought to life by the breath of God; that the hopelessness that we can feel and we can so easily encounter is not the final word, but is the work ready for resurrection and new life in the coming of Pentecost. I challenge you to look around you this week, to listen to the news, not for the death of more of the same, but for the shooting forth of new life and new hope and to actually declare it; to say it out loud to your self, to your friends, to your world; there is a good thing and there is the spirit of God.

The spirit is in our midst and is in the midst of our world. The God who breathes breath into us all blow wind still, energizing, changing, moving those who would but set sail and be taken where God is blowing us. Can we do it? Can we recognize God's work in our midst? Can we prophesy, not with corny half hearted conviction but with certainty and clarity there is our God, and to walk forth in the new life we are called to live. When the God of Pentecost breathes still, how can we not live fully, trust deeply, act courageously and speak boldly of all that we have seen and heard. Dem bones are ready; let us be moved to speak even to them the word of the Lord that brings new life and new hope to all who would hear.