

03-29-2020 Ezekiel 37:1-14 from the *New Revised Standard Version*

*By Shepard Parsons*

*The hand of the Lord came upon me, and 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. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord."*

*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. 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. Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.*

*Then he 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.' Therefore prophecy, 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. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 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."*

O God, bless these precious and holy words that we may interpret them faithfully and be filled with hope. Breath into us your Holy Spirit. Soothe our own spirits, calm our minds, and open our hearts that we may hear you speaking to us again through your Holy Word. Amen.

Before I start let's pay attention to our breathing once again: take a deep breath in through your nose, hold it a moment, then let it out slowly. Let's do this together two more times.

- I. What a precious thing is our breath. What so frightens me about the current pandemic is that Covid-19 threatens to take our breath away, literally.
  - A. So, let's think about our breath for a moment
    - we can see our breath in winter
    - sometimes we have *bad breath*, then we chew some gum or brush our teeth and it is sweet again
    - with our breath we can blow out a candle and cause an ember to burst into flame
    - with our breath we can dust off a book
    - warm our hands, whistle, speak, sing, so many things
    - it's hard to *catch our breath* when we've exerted ourselves
    - our breath is *knocked out of us* when we get a good, hard blow to our diaphragm
    - experiencing something beautiful or exhilarating can be *breath taking*
    - and when performing CPR we breathe the breath of life into another, literally.
  - B. Biblically, *breath* is one way God's power and love are conveyed.

When Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, one of the many exiles they carried into captivity was the prophet Ezekiel. To him, God's breath is life itself and the power of resurrection.

The Exiles were in the depth of despair. They were in a state of shock and paralyzed as though they were dead, without breath. They knew they were doomed and their graves would be dug in a foreign land.

Now, Ezekiel was a prophet unlike others. His prophecies seem to be divine hallucinations. While the idea of the spirit descending upon a prophet is common in the Bible, Ezekiel speaks again and again about being *seized* by the spirit, sometimes violently. Repeatedly he is *born off by the wind* — the same Hebrew word for *wind* is also translated as *breath* or *spirit* — born off to one place or another. He describes the “heavy hand of the lord” coming down upon him and leading him.

In today's passage Ezekiel is led out by the hand of the Lord to a desolate valley filled with bones, dry bones. I imagine a desert stretching to the horizon, surrounded by tall, treeless, craggy mountains. There are only four colors to catch Ezekiel's eye: the bright inaccessible yellow of the sun: the stark and empty blue sky; the Mars-like orange of the mountains and the besieged valley floor; and the white bones scattered as far as he can see.

Ezekiel wants to make sure that we know these are long gone, dead bones. There is absolutely no life in them. They are dry and empty of marrow. Unlike an excavated prehistoric fossil with each bone in its place and connected with another, these bones have been scattered recklessly across the parched valley. And the people to whom these bones belonged did not die a natural death. They were slain.

“Can these bones live?” God asks. “Only you know,” is Ezekiel's reply. Then God commands him to prophesy to the bones that they will come back together and be given the breath of life. Imagine a deafening, rattling sound as the bones stirred and rushed to form skeletons once again. And as they did, tendons and

ligaments formed, and they were covered with muscle and skin. But they were still lifeless, lying about, for there was no breath in them.

Again, Ezekiel is commanded to prophesy, this time to the *breath*. And the breath came in a wind from the four corners of the earth and filled the bodies flung across the valley. When the breath entered them they lived, and they stood on their feet like a vast army.

Then God gets to the point and interprets this vision for the prophet. “The bones are Israel and they cry out, “Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.” But God tells them,

*I'm going to open your graves, and raise you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit, my breath, within you and you will live, and I will place you on your own soil so you will know that I, the Lord have spoken and will act.*

This is the first mention of the resurrection in the Bible.

My brothers and sisters, these are tidings of great joy for all people! Out of our suffering and isolation and despair God fills our hearts with hope and breathes life into our lungs! And to all who have died God promises to raise us from our graves into new life.

Though the Covid-19 may want to rob us of our breath, it cannot. Remember, the God whose breath stirred over the waters of chaos and brought everything into being — whose breath inspired the prophets and poured over the disciples at Pentecost — whose breath fell upon Jesus at his baptism, filling him with love, and raised him from the grave; this very God breathes life into us at every moment: now, tomorrow and forever!

So, let us be filled with all faith and assurance:

Though our fear may be suffocating, God breathes new life into us,

Though our anxiety may make us short of breath, God breathes new life into us,

Though the air we breathe in isolation may be stifling, God breathes new life into us,

Though we are scattered about the neighborhood and across the world, God breathes new life into us and makes us one.

May the faith and hope and love with which God is filling us cast out any fear and uncertainty that we may breathe deeply the breath of God.

Thanks and praise be to God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit! Amen.

## **PRAYERS FOR 03-29-2020**

### **OPENING PRAYER**

Leader: Let us pray that we may experience God in our worship.

**People: O Lord, you have worked hard to gather us here this morning. You created all there is. You gave us the Law and sent the prophets who call us to live lives of love and justice. You have come to us in Jesus who frees us from slavery to sin and death. You hold us responsible for our actions and forgive us over and over again. Gracious God, you have arranged for us to be here today. Open our eyes, our ears, our hearts and our minds that we might experience your presence here in our worship of You. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.**

### **THE LORD'S PRAYER (using "debts")**

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.**