

Sermon: God's gift of Breath
Ochs Owen
5 Lent, Year A
Church, Staunton
Ezekiel 37:1-14
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Shelby
Emmanuel
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I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.

When do you pay attention to your breathing? Maybe when you hike up Hump Back Rocks or here in Staunton when you walk to the top of Johnson Street or Reservoir Hill, and your lack of breath causes a terrible pounding in your chest. We certainly pay attention to the first breath of a new born baby as he or she exits the womb. And as we wait with the dying, we witness a most holy final breath. And yet most of us don't think too much about breathing when all is well. But with the coronavirus, we're hearing more and more about sick people who are having trouble with their breathing.

Breath is essential for life. In Genesis, the first book of the Bible, the Hebrew word for breath appears - ruach, which means breath, wind or spirit. Ruach also appears in today's reading from Ezekiel. *I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.* The passage paints a stark image of the prophet amidst a multitude of dry bones scattered upon a desert valley. A haunting scene unfolds. At God's command through the prophet, the bones come together, there's even a rattling sound as they do. Then sinews and flesh come upon the bones, and skin covers them. And yet there is no life in them until God calls upon the ruach, "Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." And the breath came into them and they lived.

The bones are a metaphor for the house of Israel, who were in *exile* in Babylon in the 6th c. BCE. The Jews had felt utterly cut off from God as they lived in a foreign land. Their Temple had been destroyed, their city of Jerusalem had been plundered, their leaders maimed or killed, and their people killed or carried off against their will. Ezekiel has witnessed the heart and soul of his people withering and dying, becoming lifeless, like a valley of dry bones. ¹ Ezekiel's job was to give a word of hope and comfort to God's people who had lost heart, who were suffering a death of the spirit. But God breathes new life into those bones. And restoration and renewal will come.

Many of us feel we, too, are in exile right now. The pandemic has caused striking changes, displacement, disorientation, and a withering of spirit for many of us. Even though the disease has not yet directly affected our immediate community yet, we are all feeling its impact. Some of us now know people who have COVID-19. And at alarming speed we know more who have died of it. The unemployment rate is higher than most of us have ever known. I'm sure that all of us have either lost a job or have

¹ Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol.2, James Wallace, p.125.

someone close to us who has. The statistics and the trajectories of the disease and its impact alone can take our breath away.

We are in exile from our jobs, our schools, our businesses. We are in exile from gathering in our church building even. Many of us are experiencing anxiety and worry, fear and dread, feeling displaced like the house of Israel during their Babylonian exile. But God is saying to us, too, *I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live*. Even now, God breathes new life into us. Even now, God gives us breath in *this present moment*.

What if we took some time each day this week to pay attention to our breath? As we breathe in God's breath, we can *breathe in God's love for us*, and as we breathe out, *we breathe out God's love to the world*. Then perhaps we can remember that we are not cut off completely; we are not exiled from God, not exiled from each other in spirit. Let's remember: God gives our dry bones breath. God gives us life itself. And as long as we have breath, we must not lose heart but have hope.

Amen.