

Rev. Robert W. Brown

Just Breathe

Ezekiel 37:1-14 *Common English Bible (CEB)*

INTRODUCTION:

You are about to hear what is, arguably, one of the most vivid prophetic visions in all of the Hebrew Scriptures. Ezekiel was a prophet during a particularly difficult time in the history of the Jewish people. This generation of God's chosen people had witnessed the total annihilation of the great Temple in Jerusalem. The epicenter of their entire religion was in ruins and those who survived the brutal attack had been forcibly exiled far from their promised holy land. They had lost absolutely everything. In this ocean of hopelessness, shame and humiliation God speaks to Ezekiel through a graphically horrifying vision. Listen to how Ezekiel reports what he sees. It's called the Valley of Dry Bones, found in Chapter 37...

The Lord's power overcame me, and while I was in the Lord's spirit, he led me out and set me down in the middle of a certain valley. It was full of bones. He led me through them all around, and I saw that there were a great many of them on the valley floor, and they were very dry.

He asked me, "Human one, can these bones live again?" I said, "Lord God, only you know." He said to me, "Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the Lord's word! The Lord God proclaims to these bones: I am about to put breath in you, and you will live again. I will put sinews on you, place flesh on you, and cover you with skin. When I put breath in you, and you come to life, you will know that I am the Lord.'"

I prophesied just as I was commanded. There was a great noise as I was prophesying, then a great quaking, and the bones came together, bone by bone. When I looked, suddenly there were sinews on them. The flesh did appear, and then they were covered over with skin... But there was still no breath in them.

He said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, human one!

Say to the breath, The Lord God proclaims: Come from the four winds, breath!

Breathe into these dead bodies and let them live.”

I prophesied just as he commanded me. When the breath entered them, they came to life and stood on their feet, an extraordinarily large company. He said to me,

“Human one, these bones are the entire house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope has perished. We are completely finished.’ So now, prophesy and say to them, The Lord God proclaims: I’m opening your graves! I will raise you up from your graves, my people, and I will bring you to Israel’s fertile land. You will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and raise you up from your graves, my people. I will put my breath in you, and you will live. I will plant you on your fertile land, and you will know that I am the Lord.

I have spoken, and I will do it.

This is what the Lord says.”

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It’s particularly good to be preaching this morning. For one, I absolutely love this vision God gave Ezekiel. Secondly, I won’t get to preach at the 10am worship service again until May 14<sup>th</sup>! Next week I’ll be at the men’s Anchor Group retreat in New Hampshire, and then I’ll be with the Youth Group Mission Trip in Navaho Nation Arizona for the next two Sunday’s - followed by the YGMT Worship Service on April 30<sup>th</sup>. And then, May 7<sup>th</sup> is Climate Justice Sunday and Bob and Janet Lawson have secured a commitment from The Reverend Fred Small to bring us an important message for that very special annual service. We are a busy church! Don’t forget me.

Let us begin in prayer...

*Lord God, breathe the sweet breath of Your Holy Spirit upon us. Let these words penetrate deeply into our heart and soul so that we too might find new life even among dry bones. - AMEN*

I would like you to try something a little different with me this morning. This is not an “alter call” I promise, it’s simply a short moment of deep breathing. If you feel comfortable with it sit up straight in your seat, lay your hands cupped together in your lap, close your eyes lightly and begin breathing in slowly and deeply through your nose then let the air flow effortlessly out your mouth. Slow, deep breaths. Breathe in...release... Breathe in...release... Breathe in...release... notice the rhythm... feel your belly filling with life giving oxygen then emptying out what is not needed.

It feels good doesn't it? Breath is such a powerful thing, and most of the time we breathe without a thought about it. But learning to notice your breath and control it can have a remarkable impact on your life. I guarantee it will improve your golf swing. It will help you run the Boston Marathon better, and what's more, breath control will even help you to sing more like our own choir tenor, Matt DiBattista. Conscious breathing is the first essential step in learning any meditation technique, and a critical component of every yoga practice. Breath is the very essence of being.

It gets better. One of the Hebrew words used to mean breath is *ru'ah*. It's fun to say. Try it, *ru'ah*. *Ru'ah* is used 27 times in the Hebrew Scriptures to specifically mean breath, but here's the exciting part 232 times, the same word, *ru'ah* is used to mean Spirit of God. And sometimes it kind of means both. Like in Genesis when God breathed life into the first human or in the Gospel of John, Jesus breathed on his disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."<sup>1</sup> *Ru'ah* is the wind of Pentecost when a roaring gale came as a violent storm and filled the whole house where the Disciples were sitting. *Ru'ah* is the breath of life that fills a newborn's lungs for the first time, and the very essence of being that sustains you as you breathe in and out. Only God can give *ru'ah*. Sometimes *ru'ah* is as gentle as a sleeping kitten and sometimes *ru'ach* is as fierce and terrifying as a tornado whipping down Main Street. But *ru'ach* - the breath of God is the essence of all being. God breathes in life, and without it, there is no life.

*Ru'ah* is critical in the vision that God gives Ezekiel. The entire prophecy is so astounding when you deconstruct it and gives us insight into God's gift of life. The first thing I noticed is that it is God who brings Ezekiel into this vile disease ridden, ritually unclean place. It is God who comes to the shattered and beaten house of Israel. The bones didn't self organize and enter into a 6-step rebranding strategy to reanimate the nation of Israel. This was solely God's action on the people and God meets them at their lowest and most vile condition. Israel believes they are dead and gone, without hope or possibility of any future, a valley of dry bones returning to dust. It is quite significant to notice that God's starting place is at our lowest place.

The next step, Ezekiel reports, is that God reassembles the skeletons "bone by bone". Like sorting through a giant pile of Legos and finding just the right piece, God prepares the foundational structure that will hold new life. Only then is the infrastructure of sinew, internal organs, veins, arteries and skin put in place. God first engineers a new container to support and sustain what is about to happen.

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<sup>1</sup> John 20:22

Finally, when everything is assembled and the structure is strong and secure, only then, is the *ruah* summoned and the essence of being - the very breath of God - animates life directly into the people. There has to be a sustainable structure and system to contain the essence. God does all the work Ezekiel is simply the conduit.

Sometimes, when we are at our lowest point, it can feel like God has abandoned us. So often we think that God's presence is somehow dependent on our right actions, but this story clearly indicates a different agency. Breath indicates Spirit, and Spirit indicates the presence of the Divine! Our very being is activated and sustained by the Master Builder who fills every living thing with Divine Essence; *ruah*.

Here is the point. If you can feel your breath, God is with you. No matter what you have lost, or done, no matter if you pray like a saint or curse like cowboy. If you notice, God didn't ask the bones to pass a theological orthodoxy exam or make them promise to do better next time. God simply restored life and they began again.

I have learned to see *ruah* in everything that has life and it has reoriented everything. I can see *ruah* in my enemies and feel animosity evaporate. I see *ruah* in the breath of dogs, birds, lizards and mice. I feel my own breath and know that God is with me - and you as well - and this holy presence is not dependent on us what-so-ever. We can choose to draw close or pull away but the *ruah* faithfully remains. *Ruah* connects and unifies all things and it has absolutely nothing to do with our theology, political views, economic status, religious beliefs, lack of faith, or adherence to correct practices. This is what grace is. This is what mercy is.

When we recognize that all life and Divine Presence is God's action on us, then our response is quite naturally to be in awe and seek to live in harmony with God and all creation. *Ruah* is the starting point of finding our tiny place in the vast eternal cosmos. Simply noticing our breath is how we begin to establish connection and discern God among us. If you are at a point where you want to know more about God's desire and direction for you and your life, all you need do is just show up, open up, shut up and just breathe. God does the rest.