

2020 03 29 – Breath of God

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Our Scripture reading begins with the words, “The hand of YHWH was upon me, and it carried me away by the Spirit of YHWH and set me down in a valley – a valley full of bones.” Ezekiel, one of the ancient prophets, was experiencing a vision. In that vision, God made him walk up and down among the bones in that valley. As he walked Ezekiel could see a vast number of bones lying in the valley and they were very, very dry. There was no flesh left on these bones. They had been drying in the sun for a very long time.

Ezekiel was able to relate to the status of those bones. He and many of his fellow Israelites had been forced to leave their homes in Judah and were now living in exile. When the Babylonians captured Judah, the intruders destroyed the city of Jerusalem and carried off most of the population to their country, to Babylon. The Judeans had lost the land promised to their ancestors, their king was in prison and their holy temple lay in ruins. Their way of life had died, their existence in this strange land was unfamiliar and uncomfortable, their lives seemed dry and empty. In the midst of their exile in Babylon, the Israelites began to question, they began to question if their God, YHWH, was still with them.

We are also living in our own valley of dry bones. Our country has been invaded by COVID-19, a deadly virus. Our cities are shut down; our churches and temples are closed; our leaders are in self-isolation and we are exiled to our

apartments, our condos, our houses. We are living an existence that is both unfamiliar and uncomfortable. Our freedom of movement is gone. For many of us our ability to work and earn a living has also been compromised.

And through social media and the news, we listen and watch as this deadly invader takes over countries around the world. We listen and watch as people die in the tens of thousands. We listen and watch as those who fight on the frontlines – doctors, nurses, grocery clerks, airline attendants – are overcome by this illness. We listen and watch and wonder when the virus will cause devastation in our city, our province and our country. And we wonder if God, the Holy Mystery, the Ground of our Being can still be with us.

I invite you now to use the CHAT function on your computer or your phone to share whatever you are comfortable sharing about the impact of COVID-19 on your life. What stress, what anxiety, what feelings are you experiencing in this exile, in this valley of dry bones? Your response can be a word, a phrase, a sentence, or even a paragraph. I just want to remind you to hit enter or send only if you are comfortable sharing what you have written with everyone. What feelings are you experiencing?

In the midst of his exile, Ezekiel had a vision. In that vision God asked him, “Mere mortal, can these bones live?” Ezekiel, recognizing his limitations, admitted that only YHWH could know the answer to that question. And then God gave Ezekiel a job. God told Ezekiel to prophesy, he told Ezekiel to prophesy to those dry, lifeless bones. So Ezekiel spoke the words that YHWH had given him.

He said, “Dry bones, hear the word of YHWH! Sovereign YHWH says to these bones I am going to breathe life into you. I will fasten sinews on you, clothe you with flesh, cover you with skin, and give you breath. And you will live, and you will know that I am YHWH!”

Ezekiel was amazed because he could see that the bones were responding to his words. The bones were connecting again, sinews appeared and flesh clothed them and skin covered them. They were starting to look human again, but there was still one thing missing. There was no breath in them, they were not living.

So God told Ezekiel to prophesy to the wind. Ezekiel did as he was told and said, “Approach from the four winds, Breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.” Ezekiel prophesied to the wind, and the dry bones, now flesh and blood, came alive and stood on their feet. It is important for us to realize that the Hebrew word for breath, ruach, is the same word that is used for wind and for Spirit. When Ezekiel spoke to the wind, he was literally calling on the life-giving Spirit of God, the breath of God to give life to those dry, lifeless bones. And it worked.

Luckily, Ezekiel didn't have to go to a therapist to help him figure out the meaning of his vision. YHWH made sure that Ezekiel knew what it meant. God said, “Mere mortal, these bones are the whole House of Israel.” God explained that the Israelites had lost hope. They were dry and lifeless because they believed that they would never be able to return to their homeland. So God told Ezekiel to prophesy to the Israelites, to say “Thus says Sovereign YHWH: I will return

you to the land of Israel.... I will open your graves.... I will put my Spirit back into you and you will return to life, and I will settle you back on your own land. “

Ezekiel's vision was a vision of hope in a difficult time. It was a vision of new life in a time of death. It was the promise of daylight at the darkest of moments. It wasn't instant freedom, but rather the promise of salvation, the promise of new life.

I have to admit that I haven't had a vision like Ezekiel's but I have definitely experienced many glimpses of the presence of God during this past week. In the midst of a valley of dry bones, I saw and heard my first meadowlark of this spring season. That beautiful bird with its glorious song, is always, for me, a reminder of the promise of new life that comes every year. In the midst of a valley of dry bones, I have felt the breath of God in the paper hearts that families have placed in their front windows in support of our health workers. In the midst of a valley of dry bones, I have experienced the healing breath of God in the news that in Wuhan China they have started reopening their borders and lifting some of the restrictions on their population.

Where have you experienced the breath of God? Where have you seen glimpses of hope? Where have you felt the gift of the life-giving Spirit? Again, I invite you to share what you comfortable sharing by typing in the group chat. Keep typing even as I continue speaking.

The breath of God, the wind, the Holy Spirit, Ruach, the Essence of Love. Every time we breath, every time we take notice of our breath, we are reminded of the life-giving presence of God. The breath of God is with us always, ready to lift us up and take us back to where we belong.