

March 26, 2023
The Fifth Sunday in Lent

Ezekiel 37: 1-14
Psalm 130
Romans 8: 6-11
John 11: 1-45

I want us to begin this morning by breathing. Close your eyes and breathe. Give yourself a moment to feel your own breath. Now...if you are feeling adventurous...the next time you breath out, hold the breath out. Just for a few seconds, sit in the stillness. And then, when you feel the pull to breathe in again, take a breath. Let your shoulders relax as you come back to the ease of breathing in and out.

It doesn't take long for our bodies to crave the next breath, does it? We simply can't go without it. Breath is essential.

The term for breath in Hebrew is "*ruwach*" and it is a rich word that is used over and over again in our reading from the prophet Ezekiel. But, *ruwach* connotes something much deeper than the simple act of breathing. In Hebrew, when the writer uses the word *ruwach*, he is describing a breath that is created through Spirit. It's the thing that animates us as humans, the part of God that touches us deep within our souls. It's the energy that surges in and through us uniting us with the Divine, giving us life, and sustaining us.

Look at verse 5 in Ezekiel. This is the moment when the dry bones come to life, when the dry bones hear the command of God, "I will cause *breath* to enter you, and you shall live." And in verse 14 God says, "I will put my *spirit* within you, and you shall live." Breath and Spirit. God touching the depth of our soul. And the bones rattle, flesh forms, and the bones live.

That's the first lesson I want you to take with you this morning. Our whole being is given meaning and purpose through divine action that brings even the driest and darkest parts of ourselves to life.

The second lesson that I want you to take with you comes from our next from John. Lazarus, whom Jesus loved, has died. In fact, he had been dead for 4 days. That's important. In the Jewish tradition, it was believed that the soul departed the body after day 3 so when the text indicates that this was day 4 – we know that Lazarus had breathed his last breath.

A deep and profound grief overcomes Mary and Martha. And in one of the most powerful passages of scripture, we are told that Jesus weeps. It's a candid, raw moment that embodies the pain and anger of loss.

What happens next is gut wrenching. Mary and Martha both cry out – Lord if you had only been here! If only you had been here our brother would not have died. The dry bones are now their reality.

Notice the emotions and the sensations of the moment. For Ezekiel, I imagine the sand of the desert, the heat of the sun, parched throats, and tired bodies. Worn out, hopeless, spent. For Mary, Martha, and Jesus, I imagine wet tears, swollen eyes, weak yet pounding hearts, loneliness, desperation.

Overwhelming sorrow and pain. Wondering if life could ever come back.

That's the moment when the breath of God is right there if we would only breathe it in.

In our Lenten study of Julian of Norwich, a 14th century mystic, we have been learning about this very moment of breathing in right when our sorrow meets our joy. When we have hit bottom and we hunger for God to bring us back to life. Julian reminds us that...

"God is nearer to us than our own soul; for he is the foundation on which our soul stands...for our soul sits in God in true rest, and our soul stands in God in sure strength, and our soul is...rooted in God in endless love..."

She goes on to write that *"God wants us to know that he keeps us equally safe in sorrow and in joy."*

Those are beautiful, reassuring words but at times, it's hard to believe that God keeps us safe when we hurt so bad. When we feel distant from the love of God, when we have lost the things that are most dear, when we dwell in darkness, when our bones are dry...Jesus, if you had only been here because I'm not feeling so safe right now.

Robert Fruehwirth, who wrote a beautiful book on Julian that we have been using for our Lenten study, says this about God's presence in these times.

"God's love does not mean an escape from the hurt and suffering of our lives, but rather support to face these more squarely so that they might be brought consciously into contact with God's Word in Jesus, and made available for healing."

That's *ruwach*. The breath and the spirit enlivening our souls, comforting us in darkness. But Fruehwirth goes on to say that life through the Spirit means that we are called to live, to breathe again, and to grow out of the loss we have experienced. He writes,

"...the piercing wounds we have endured in life, and the self-emptying loss and grief that we have endured, can serve to make us more open to others, more sensitive and more empathic. But for this to happen we need the courage to accept our wounds and then the faith to offer them to God, and the patience to wait for transformation."

As we move closer to Holy Week, we move closer and closer to the moment when we will look at the cross and feel the fullness of loss and suffering. We will reach into the depths of our own souls and call out to God. Good Friday allows us the space to name what hurts and to turn it over to God. Because we know as people of faith that suffering is not the final answer. It doesn't get the last word. And when we proclaim on Easter Morning...He is risen! He is risen indeed! we are reminded that God's spirit is more powerful than any darkness we may face on this earth.

That's the power of the resurrection for us today in this place. That's God's breath filling us with hope. Here is what I know for certain...we will experience pain in our lives. At times, there will be no simple solution. But we can move through it with the promise that we don't have to breathe alone. Your redemption, your comfort, your wholeness is possible. God just asks us to breathe it in and live. Amen.