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SERMON

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Air: The Breath Between Us

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Introduction

22,000. That is the average number of breaths a person takes every day.

I bet you just noticed your own breathing.

Most of the time, we're unaware of this vital act—lungs drawing in air, oxygen crossing into our blood, carbon dioxide exhaled back out.

That breath doesn't just vanish. It's absorbed by trees and plants, fueling photosynthesis, and returning oxygen to the air. Air connects us. It ties us to the earth and binds us to one another.

For better, and sometimes, for worse.

We know that the smoke of wildfires does not stop at the border of a town, state, or even country. We know that highway smog drifts to farmland; that a virus breathed out in one crowded room can travel through the air and change lives across the globe.

This, however, is not just biology—it's theology.

“We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

Dr. King's words echo through every nook and cranny of creation.

Our common language picks up on this, too. We say, “There's something in the air,” or we want to “clear the air.”

The air is filled with more than particles.

What's put into the air affects not just one of us, but all of us.

In Hebrew Scripture, the word is *ruach*—breath, wind, air, God’s animating Spirit.

In our Scripture reading this morning, the prophet Ezekiel is taken to a valley where the air is thick with despair, stilled by death, where all that remains are dry bones.

But there, God calls him to prophesy, anyway, to speak words of hope and life, to call upon the *ruach*.

As we hear this strange and sacred vision, listen for how the wind shifts.

Before we turn to Ezekiel this morning, please join me in prayer.

Prayer for Illumination

Holy God,
As we listen for your word in Scripture,
stir your Spirit within us.
Open us to hear your voice—
not only words of comfort,
but the bold truth we need for life.
Give us courage to listen,
and faith to speak,
so that what we carry into the world
might bring hope, justice, and peace.
Amen.

Scripture Ezekiel 37:1-13

The Valley of Dry Bones

37 The hand of the Lord came upon me, and God brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ² The Lord led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³ God said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” ⁴ Then God said to me,

“Prophecy to these bones and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. ⁵ Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶ 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.”

⁷ 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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ Then the Lord 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.” ¹⁰ I prophesied as God commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

¹¹ Then the Lord 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.’ ¹² 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. ¹³ And you shall know that I am the LORD when I open your graves and bring you up from your graves, O my people.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Can These Bones Live?

The book of Ezekiel is weird, sometimes even disturbing. And, though it’s familiarity may sand the edges, this vision could be the opening of a horror movie. Yet, unlike much of what comes before it, this vision ends with hope.

Ezekiel was born into a priestly family. He had expected to serve in the Temple. Instead, he finds himself in exile in Babylon, living in a refugee camp, and called by God not as a priest, but as a prophet. And that is not a fun job.

For 33 chapters, Ezekiel warns that Jerusalem will fall, and the Temple will be destroyed. People would not have been excited to run into him.

We join Ezekiel after the worst has happened.

Ezekiel once proclaimed a sliver of hope to them—God may leave the Temple, but won't leave them. God would one day bring them back to their land; one day God would replace their hearts of stone with soft, hearts of flesh.

But that hope is distant and abstract as they sit in Babylon, reeling from the news that their homeland is no longer theirs. Ezekiel is exhausted.

And in a vision, God places him in a disturbing scene, yet it is a scene that captures what is in the air. He stands amid a valley of dry bones.

“Can these bones live?” God asks.

Ezekiel doesn't have an answer.

Rationally, no, it is impossible for dry bones to live. Yet, this is God he is speaking to.

“You tell me,” Ezekiel responds.

It's not really about bones. The Jewish people had lost the basis of their faith, their identity, their hope. They were in a deep valley of despair. You can hear the disorientation in Psalm 137, “How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?”

But even when all hope seemed lost, God was still with God's people and had a purpose for their future.

The Lord answers Ezekiel with a command—prophesy to these bones.

We sometimes have a idea of prophecy that is more akin to fortune telling. A prophet predicts the future, then you wait and see if they are correct.

But prophecy in Scripture has a different nuance. The prophet tells the people a word from the Lord of what is to come or what is happening now that they aren't seeing. The prophet makes clear what path God's people are on, and what detours they could choose to take.

Like the warnings of Amos: If you continue to levy unfair taxes on the poor, if you continue to ignore corruption, and punish those who speak the truth, then you will find yourselves in exile.

Like the hope of Isaiah: If you repent, act justly, care for the vulnerable, and remember that God is God and you are not... then you can rebuild what has been lost, repair what has been broken. This time on a solid foundation.

Prophecy is not so much about predicting the future. It is about taking off our blinders so we might recognize where we are and how we got here. So, like Siri urging us to make U-Turn, we might hear again and again the invitation to repent, to go God's way that leads to life.

Ezekiel prophesizes to the bones and to the wind. Ezekiel speaks God's word of hope and life. And God makes a way out of no way.

The bones become flesh and blood. The wind becomes breath, enlivening, not just each individual but the whole community, the whole body of God's people. Ruach blows the once-still air between them, becomes breath within them, and carries them forward into the future God has made possible.

Ruach reconnects the people to God and to one another, and they rise together.

How powerful is what we put into the air? —the power of purpose or paralysis, of connection or disconnection, of despair or hope, of life or death.

Breathing in Community

Ruach, the breath connects us.

I mean this theologically, but it is also biologically true.

Take singing, for example.

When we sing together, we breathe together. A 2015 Oxford study showed that strangers who sang together for an hour emerged from the sessions with “an unusually close bond.”

The professor leading the study, Robin Dunbar, believes this is because of prolonged exhalation, which releases endorphins. The effect is then amplified, she says, in choirs because of an added sense of vocal synchrony.

God gave us a regulation tool within our bodies for peace—for ourselves and others. When we take a deep breaths, we calm our nervous system, slow our heart rates, and lower our blood pressure. The effects are increased in community, adding the component of connection. And even more so when we add words and melodies.

We practice this almost by accident every Sunday. When we sing hymns and when we join our voices in prayer. God has given us practices within the body of Christ to speak peace into the air, peace carried by the breath between us.

Breathe In Peace

In the Gospel of John, following Jesus’ death and resurrection, the disciples hide behind a locked door, for fear of what the religious and political leaders may do to them. They had heard the news from Mary Magdalene that Jesus was raised from the dead. Peter and John had rushed to the tomb, finding it empty. Then Mary, as she sat weeping, worried someone had carried his body away, was met by the risen Jesus.

Yet, hope had not broken through the despair, the fear, the disorientation that the disciples felt. And so, they hid, waiting for God-knows-what, until Jesus appear with them in the flesh, immediately saying, “Peace be with you.”

Breathe in peace.

Then he told them that as the Father sent him, he was sending them. The time to despair, to cower, to freeze in confusion was over.

And he breathed on them. In Greek, ruach becomes pneuma—breath, wind, air, Spirit. Jesus breathed God’s Spirit into them and sent them. The Spirit did not just comfort them; she commissioned them! The breath between them transformed from the stale, thick air of fear to the fresh wind of hope.

Breathe out hope.

Breathe Out Hope

Join me to breathe for a moment:

Breathe in peace.

Breathe out hope.

Breath in peace.

Breath out hope.

Where in your life, in our community, in our world are the valleys of dry bones?

Where are the places of fear, uncertainty, violence, and death?

What is being spoken into those places within us and beyond us?

Is it fear upon fear, rage upon rage, falsehood upon falsehood?

Do you hear and join voices shouting into the void?

Or do you hear and join the voices of prophets speaking hope, speaking life, prophesying to the wind?

Several decades ago, a young minister decided to speak over the airwaves in a new way, to a new generation.

Fred Rogers, better known as Mister Rogers, was interested in television because of how much he hated it. It was, to him throughout the 1950's, a desolate land. But he also saw that it was full of potential life.

Mister Rogers transformed children's television, helped a generation grow in curiosity and kindness, and taught parents how to be trusted adults in a sometimes-scary world.

He was a true prophet speaking through the airwaves, with quiet courage.

He did this behind the scenes, never letting corporate interests overtake his values.

Fred Rogers was deeply concerned about consumerism in American culture—especially how companies targeted children, manipulating them to become tiny consumers themselves. The way Fred Rogers saw it, in order to market to a child, you must make them think that they need something they do not have—they must feel an inadequacy, a fear, or a sense that they are missing out.

It was the opposite of what he was compelled to say again and again, "I like you just the way you are."

So, he did not allow commercials to advertise to children or lend his image to the marketing of products.

Then there was what he did on camera.

Mister Rogers dipped his feet in a kiddie pool with Officer Clemmons, a black police officer character on the show, at a time when most pools remained segregated. The same year, in fact, that Dr. King was assassinated.

He invited a young boy in a wheelchair to come on the show and speak openly about his disability, almost a decade before the Americans with Disabilities Act passed.

He treated neighbors with dignity and confronted the fears of his time.

He spoke directly and calmly to children (and many adults) about big, complicated, scary things in their lives and in the world. Saying, “Anything that’s human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable.”

Can these bones live?

We claim God’s promise in faith to say that they can.

So...

Let’s stop shouting into the void.

And start prophesying to the wind.

Let’s courageously speak hope in the places where fear, despair, disconnection, all that is death-dealing in this world pervades.

Hope that calls us to love one another. Hope that reminds us that God is God, and we are not. Hope that will not fail because God does not abandon us in the valleys.

I pray that in this community of faith, you may breathe in God’s peace.

Because you are called to go into your world—your job, your school, your neighborhood, the places and people you are called to in our city, nation, and world—and breathe out prophetic hope.

Breathe in peace.

Breathe out hope.

Amen.

Charge and Benediction

One more time:

Breathe in peace.

Breathe out hope.

God's breath within us is for our comfort and strength. *And*, God's Spirit, who dwells in us and who moves beyond us, commissions us to go out into the world with hope; to speak life in places that seem desolate and beyond repair.

Perhaps you've never heard this, but I hope you take it to heart:

You are called to be a prophet. And this world needs more prophets speaking God's word of life into it today.

So, go, and prophesy hope.

And as you do, trust in this blessing:

The love of God the Father,
the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
are with you today and always. Amen.



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