

“Breathe!”

Ezek. 37:1-14, Ps. 130, Jn. 11:1-45, Rom. 8:6-11
Lent 5, Hope Church, March 9, 2008, Lynn Japinga

Imagine that the Soviet Union had won the cold war in the 1960s and we had been forced to live in Siberia.

That’s what the prophet Ezekiel and the people of Israel felt like. Their once powerful nation was gone. They had lost one military battle after another and now the people that were left had been carried off to Babylon. The people had lost their independence and freedom. They could not practice their faith the way they would like. They were very far from home. And worse than the geographical sense of dislocation and loss was the sense that they had completely failed as God’s people. They had worshipped other gods and trusted other nations. And now God had abandoned them in the middle of Babylon. They had no future. They were completely dispirited and discouraged.

And in the midst of this despair, the prophet Ezekiel had a vision. God showed him a valley of very dry bones. The Jewish people believed that people were cursed if they had not had a proper burial. Death was bad enough, but if the body was left out to be exposed to the sun and the wild animals, that was truly a sign that your life had been a failure. So when God asked Ezekiel if these bones could live, the obvious answer would have been no. Dead is dead. The bones had been there for years. The shin bone was a long way from the knee bone. Life cannot come out of death.

Many of us have some dry bones in our lives.

You are in a marriage that seems hopelessly dead. You fell out of love a long time ago, and you don't like each other much any more.

You are in a job that pays the bills but sucks the life out of you.

You would be happy to take a job that sucks the life out of you, because right now you are unemployed and your economic future is grim.

You have a child who is deeply unhappy.

You have a parent who is descending deeper and deeper into Alzheimers.

You have a lost someone important and the grief is so heavy that you don't know how much longer you can survive it.

Can these dry bones live? Is there hope for the future? The obvious answer is often no. There is too much death here. Too much loss and grief. There is no future. We are too dispirited.

That's what Mary and Martha felt when Jesus showed up too late to be of any help to Lazarus. Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died, Martha said. And then Jesus made the rather foolish suggestion to remove the stone that sealed the tomb. He's been dead four days, Martha said. It's going to stink!

Several paintings of this scene show some of the people holding their noses for fear for the smell! Dead is dead, after all. No, these dry bones can't live. Corpses do not come walking out of the grave.

But Lazarus did. God raised him from the dead.

And it was equally unexpected when God's Spirit blew through that valley of dry bones and the shin bone connected to the knee bone, and the muscles and the skin formed on the bones. And then God's spirit blew through that valley again, and just as God

breathed life into the first human being after making him out of dust, so God breathed life into these bodies that had moments earlier been bones. So dead wasn't dead, after all.

This was a vision, or a dream. The people of Israel were as dead as these bones. They did not deserve a future. And yet ... and yet ... God promises to open their graves. God's spirit will blow through the people in exile, and God will bring them home.

And what about us? Is there any future for us? For what seems dead and dried out and hopeless in our lives?

There are no easy answers. This is not a sermon listing three ways you can put the dry bones together and make your life better. Because it isn't really about us. There is nothing we can do. Dead is dead. But the point of the texts for today is that when everything seems dead and hopeless, when we are completely dispirited, God's spirit moves through the valley and breathes new life.

Maybe there is a glimmer of affection in that marriage.

Maybe the child says thank you.

Maybe there is some sign that you are doing good work in the job you dislike.

Maybe there is some laughter in the midst of the grief.

These can be signs that God's Spirit is blowing through us. And God invites and enables us to breathe in God's spirit. It often seems easier to close ourselves off. We try to protect ourselves from any more pain. We hold our noses to avoid the stink. We tell God that preaching to a valley of dry bones is a waste of time. But God calls us to be open to the power of the spirit and let God work through us.

I take a water aerobics class during the summer, and sometimes in a challenging sequence the instructor will say, Breathe! And I usually find that I've been holding my

breath. That seems easier at the time, but in the long run, it doesn't help. You need the oxygen flowing through your body all the time.

And maybe that is what God says to us.

When we are dispirited by grief or anger or boredom, God says breathe!

When we are holding our noses, God says breathe.

But God doesn't simply leave it up to us. God breathes for us, as it were. God sends God's breath, God's spirit, to breathe in us, and empower us, and give us new life.