



“Breath of Spring”
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Scripture (NRSV):

Ezekiel 37:1-14

1 The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he 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 He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. 3 He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." 4

Then he 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 he 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 he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

11 Then he 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.

14 I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord."

Sermon:

We are familiar with this image of a valley full of bones, unburied, desecrated. The unburied dead, left to rot, to be scavenged by coyotes and crows, hyenas and vultures. We have seen the like; in the killing fields of Cambodia, the Bosnian and Rwandan genocides, the death camps of the Nazi's, Wounded Knee, South Dakota.

Esarhaddon, the ancient king of Assyria in 680 BCE swore the following curse on his enemies: "May Ninurta, leader of the gods, fell you with his fierce arrow, and fill the plain with your corpses, give your flesh to eagles and vultures to feed upon."

Ezekiel is a prophet to people in exile, people driven from home and land. Surely they experienced such killing fields. And now, they are captives far away in Babylon, weeping and despairing of ever seeing their homeland again, losing their culture, their religion, their god, lost to the mists of time.

He isn't a consoling prophet either...for almost the entirety of this book, he has been excoriating the Israelites, telling them that they got what they deserved for their violent, greedy, bloodthirsty, idolatrous ways. They abandoned any semblance of following the commands of Yahweh, their God by caring for the widow the orphan and the stranger in the land; they despised justice in their courts, practiced idolatries, stole land, abused the weak and the powerless, enjoyed the sick gods of their own egos and fantasies and lusts.

Gosh, sound like any place you know?!

It sometimes happens that way...suddenly the ancient story becomes our story. And if it isn't a nice story to start with, if the vast imaginative story of the prophet Ezekiel is not a nice story...well, then we get anxious and uncomfortable.

I am pretty clear that this prophet is telling one of the darker stories of our human family. We murder and act as criminals, we withhold justice, *in every land*. We steal, and cheat and lie, *in every land*.

We despise the weak and fawn upon the powerful and famous, and we compromise our values of decency and goodness for that power and fame. This is true *everywhere*.

We slam our doors against the stranger, throw stones at the person who is different, whether it is in Uganda, or Nevada, Syria or North Carolina.

Ezekiel relishes telling us of our fallen state, our wickedness, our brokenness. And our punishments. Our well-deserved punishments.

But then comes this vision, which we heard read today, late into the book:
This vision is a mix of horror story and redemption story.

- The valley of unburied dead, the innumerable graves; this is a horror.
- The breath of God, the wind of God that blew over creation at the beginning of time, the spirit of God that was breathed into the lungs of the first human beings at creation and that blows through this vision... *that* is the redemption story.

It is that Spirit to create, that same life giving wind, breath, Spirit (*ruah*) that blows into those reanimated dead and those corpses lifted out of their graves, so that they become more than zombies...they are not just bones, sinews, flesh and skin stirring from the ground...they are *living people*.

A *vast multitude* of fully living humans, where before there was only death.

A multitude of humans as new as on the first day of human creation, breathed into with the breath of God, as fresh as babies, as tender as the first flower of creation.

They weren't just human again, they were alive with God's breath, God's spirit, standing joyfully alive!

As naked as the first humans, as open-eyed and eager as the first humans, as innocent and open and joyful and grateful and filled with awe, as the first humans.

Full, full up with God's life, God's breath, God's spirit.

I think Ezekiel was a mean old bugger, scary and violent. He needed God to give him a vision that he never could have imagined by himself.

He needed a different perception of reality, an understanding of the world, as seen through God's eyes.

A world of redemption through God's will, God's choosing, God's compassionate and creative heart.

It isn't in God's design for creation that we have genocide.

So God shows Ezekiel, and the Israelites in exile, and us...just what God can imagine, design, create, animate, restore, renew.

The powerful breath of God's life, overpowering the stink of death.

Not just a little, but an entire valley of death, countless graves of the dead.

We are just weeks away from remembering the stink of death ravaging the body of Jesus.

We need to be reminded, lest we despair, that even with the stink of death around us in the world... the sweet breath of God is the biggest breath, the greatest wind, the ultimate movement of Spirit that swirls with power over all creation, making it go!

Like the breath of spring; Spirit does, it can, it will forever, blow over creation and stir it to life.

Like the mystery and wonder of Easter, the Spirit of God, the breath of God, will stir up life where there has been only death.

I read in a commentary that Ezekiel was a bit crazy, but also a realist. He wrote so fiercely because he saw what happened with clear eyes, and realistic understanding of consequences; action and reaction. Warning, and consequences of ignoring the warning. Quite reasonable.

But this valley is beyond reason. It is beyond explanation or expectation. It is the mystery of God's power, poured out for LIFE.

Death may be our due. Ezekiel seemed to think so.

But life, the Spirit pouring God's breath into creation to give it life...this is the mind of God, this is the design of the Maker of All Things.

Death may be our due. But it is not our future.

God sent Ezekiel a vision.

God sent us Jesus.

God's vision and design is of a Spirit-filled, God-filled life, as sweet, as rich, as heady with delight as the delicious, life giving breath of Spring.

We may not deserve it, but there it is.

Be grateful, be amazed, be glad, be hopeful, be strong.

And say,

Amen!