

A Homily by the Very Rev. Dr. Renée Tembeckjian
Trinity Episcopal Church
26 March 2023
Lent 5A: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

“Deep Breath”

There are times in this life when we watch or listen closely for signs of breath. New parents may lean into the cradle for the tiniest exhale. Sitting vigil with a suffering or dying loved one, we may focus on every rise and fall of the chest. How magnified this became in the pandemic, when countless human beings were struggling to breathe.

Then there are times breath is not quiet, but large. Think of swimming underwater before bursting through the surface for a massive gulp of air – when breath is celebratory, even exultant.

The word, breath (Greek: *pneuma*; Hebrew: *ruach*) is translated as *wind* or *spirit*, and throughout scripture, it refers to more than biology or physiology, but to the very life force itself. To speak of breath is to speak of the holy. And, in our times of darkness or despair, the breath we watch and listen for, even long for, is the breath – spirit – of God.

Some have even dreamed of it...as the prophet Ezekiel did.

He sees a valley of very dry bones – a vivid sign of no future for his people, scattered and disconnected as they have become from any hope. Yet, from the midst of this barren landscape of death, Ezekiel perceives a divine question:

Mortal, can these bones live?

Notice that in this iconic story, it is not the human who asks the question, but who *receives* the question. And the mortal is not instructed to passively watch and wait, but to *act*, to participate in partnership with his God. He is called to give voice to the seemingly impossible chapter of new life. *Prophecy to the bones*, he is told. *Prophecy to the breath*...as if God were saying, You call it.

And when Ezekiel steps up and does his part, when he boldly declares a divine reality far beyond what human hearts dare imagine or human eyes can see, what had been dry and dead awakens into new life.

Will that new life be just as it was before?

I think not. Sorrow, despair, and death are real.

But even when life is changed, is it possible that it is not, in fact, ended?

I think yes... but, like Ezekiel, we are called beyond a passive waiting. We must first acknowledge the darkness before us, around us, and perhaps even within us, and then, in our own and varied ways, give voice to the promise of new life.

You may have known such valleys in your own life and history – passages of darkness, sorrow, or dread, when everything seemed bleak or barren, as if you are past the age or time for any new chapter to be written in your life. Perhaps you have been discouraged, or alone, as disconnected from hope as those bones in Ezekiel’s valley.

But, today’s Gospel conveys that we are *not* alone in such experiences, as we find Jesus himself in such a valley. As his widening profile threatens both secular and religious leaders, he knows that staying true to his message of justice, mercy, and peace will cost him the very last breath of his human life.

And if that were not enough, word arrives from Bethany that his friend, Lazarus, has died, and that the sisters, Mary and Martha, blame him for not having arrived in time.

Everything swirling around him – publicly and personally – seems to convey that darkness is winning out. With that, as he reaches the tomb of his friend, standing as he does upon a literal threshold between life and death...

...scripture says that Jesus wept.

Those precious tears –like holy water in a dry desert – somehow communicate more than human sorrow, but divine wisdom – that perhaps our human grief must be fully expressed before we can be fully open to the promise of new life, before we can, as it were, *prophesy to the bone...*

...which Jesus does.

In calling for Lazarus to *come forth*, Jesus gives voice to the very heart of the Christian hope – that the Breath of Life will enter even the darkest tomb of our sorrow and despair, that the Wind of Hope will sweep across even our driest valley of dry bone, and that the Spirit of Love will prevail even in the midst of death itself.

So, when *you* are standing on the threshold of life and death, as we all will someday, or when you weep at the grave of a friend, as Jesus did that day, or when the weight of circumstances press so heavily upon your chest that you can barely draw a breath...

...open your mind, heart, and spirit to receive the same question Ezekiel did:

Mortal, can these bones live?

...and then, in a celebratory, exultant, *divine* breath of air, give voice to the answer, as Jesus did:

Yes... Yes.... Yes...

Believe it.

Amen.