

St John United Church of Christ
Rev. Barbara Lohrbach
March 9, 2008

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Breath of God

The toe bone connected to the foot bone,
the foot bone connected to the ankle bone,
the ankle bone connected to the leg bone
Now hear the word of the Lord.

‘Dem bones, ‘Dem bones gonna walk around....

We all know that spiritual that set to music Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones coming together. It’s a fun song and if you can get past the image of a valley full of dry bones...dead bones...really dead bones, this story of Ezekiel and the dry bones is fun, too. How can this story be fun? Well, perhaps the story isn’t necessarily fun, but it is a story filled with hope.

Ezekiel was a Hebrew prophet. In confirmation we’ve been working with all the names that describe this biblical group we call Hebrews. It is confusing at times to keep all this straight. A mini-refresher course for us today—the Hebrews were the slaves that Moses freed from slavery in Egypt, who then became known as the people of Israel or Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness and then settled into the promised land that we know today as Israel and Palestine. In time the Israelites or Hebrews became two nations—the northern region was known as Israel and the southern region was Judah. All this fulfilled the promise of God to their founder—Abraham. Today we call the people of Abraham, Moses and Jesus, the Jews...whose religion is Judaism.

Ezekiel is one of these Hebrews and is a prophet. What is a biblical prophet? (non-rhetorical question)

(a messenger of God, one who brings the word of the Lord)

The story of the valley of dry bones is set in the time after the Jews were defeated by the Babylonians. The tribes of Israel and Judah were scattered...some in Babylon and others still in Israel...no longer a vital thriving community that could worship God in the holy place, Jerusalem. They were dead...metaphorically speaking...like the dry bones.

Ezekiel has heard the grumbling and cynical comments of his fellow exiles—“our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, and we are cut off completely.” Ezekiel’s mission is to inspire some hope.

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Have you ever felt like these Hebrews in exile...these Israelites? Your bones are dried up, your hope is lost, you are cut off completely. We use different images, but our words express the same feeling.

“I feel like I am falling apart.”

“I don’t have my act together.”

“I just lost it today.”

“I came unglued.”

“I really feel wiped out.”

“I’ve run out of gas.”

We can almost hear our dry bones clattering when we make these comments. We are like dead limbs. Nothing holds our life together. Can these bones live? Ezekiel tells his fellow exiles—yes! “God showed me a valley of dry bones. God said, ‘Prophesy to these bones and tell them to hear the word of the Lord.’” And what is the word of the Lord? “I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and I will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and I, your God, will put breath in you and you shall live. And you shall know that I am the Lord.” Then God tells Ezekiel to prophesy—“Come from the four winds, Breath! Breathe on these dead, so that they may come to life.” And the breath entered them and they came to life.

The breath of God, God’s very essence, is a symbol of life...a life shared with us. Many places in Hebrew scripture, God is described as the breath of life. God breathes life into us, sustains us, enlivens us. Remember the story of creation. God scoops up the clay and breathes life into humankind. What would happen if we understood that our very breath is God’s breath and that every breath of every human being is God’s breath? How would we treat one another?

The dry bones needed sinews and flesh to come together. What will help us to come together when we come unglued...when we lose it...when we don’t have our act together? What do we need to hold our life together?

Could it be that in our valley of the dry bones we need to pay attention to our inner being...find that still, quiet place within ourselves?

Could it be that in our valley of dry bones, we need time with those we love? Not 5 minutes here and there, but a time we set aside to laugh and love and cherish one another.

Could it be that in our valley of dry bones, we need to give ourselves permission to be human, and when we make mistakes to forgive ourselves?

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Could it be that in our valley of dry bones, we need to confront the habits that suck the life from us...suck the very breath from us?

Could it be that in our valley of dry bones, we need to ask for help? It is not a sign of weakness to need help. Ask for help...from a friend or family member... or from a professional who can assess our situation and give us the tools to cope when our spirits are bone-dry.

Could it be that our valley of dry bones is a call to stay with the experience and not run from it...pay attention and learn from this so that we can grow?

The list is endless. More importantly, the promise of God to be with us in the valley and to breathe life back into us is endless...it never ceases to be.

In preparing for this sermon, I also sensed God's voice saying, "Do not forget that this is not only about our valley of bone-dry spirits, but also the need to reach out to others who literally live in the valley of dry bones." Do not forget that every 6 seconds a child dies of hunger related illness. Do not forget that two-thirds of our world exists on less than a dollar a day? Do not forget the stranger, the orphan, the widow and those who live with the fear of death on a daily basis?

The images of coming unglued and feeling like we are falling apart are real. We've all had them. We've all been there. Today we are offered an image of hope by the prophet Ezekiel. Can these bones live? Yes...yes—this is the word of the Lord for us today!

Today let's take a few moments and put some flesh on our bone-dry spirits.

First--quiet your body and close your eyes.

Be aware of your breath...take a deep breath in and let that breath out.

Forget where you are and those that are sitting near you.

Be aware of only you.

Now become aware of the bones in your body.

Begin with your skull, your neck, your shoulders, your arms.

Continue through your body, being mindful of the wonder of how you are created.

Go to Ezekiel's valley.

Imagine your bones in a pile, no flesh, no sinew, no skin.

Just your bones...in a heap, white and dry...no life, no movement...only silence, complete silence.

Out of the silence a small voice is heard. It is your voice.

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You tell God about your dry bones...the situations where you lack life...
how you feel about your life.
Go ahead...tell God now how dry and mundane and empty life feels.

Now begin to listen for God.

God speaks to you, the same words spoken to the dry bones:

“I will make breath enter you, and you will live...

I shall put sinews on you...

I shall make flesh grow on you...

I will cover you with skin...

I will give you breath...

And you will live...

You will live...

And you will know that I am your God as well.

“Come from the four winds, Breath; breathe on these dry bones that they
may come to life.”

Feel God’s breath fill your dry bones.

See the life return to your ankles, feet, legs, your hands, arms, neck...all the
parts of your body.

See everything come together into you...the splendid creation of God...
You...God’s child.

Feel your breath...see yourself rise and dance with joy. Embrace God and know
that there is hope. As you open your eyes, picture God smiling at the wonderful
person you are.

The Israelites needed to know that there was still hope for them in the midst of a
foreign land, in the midst of the destruction of their world. We need to know that
there is still hope for us. Can these bones live? The word of the Lord says, “yes.”
Keep breathing for it is God’s breath that makes you alive!

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Responsive Prayer
“Come from the four winds, Breath;
breathe on these dead, so that they come to life!”

We remember those who are deep in depression, whose inner world is bleak and dark...

We remember those who have said farewell to a loved one and who feel that joy will never return...

We remember those who are caught up in running through life and are entangled in frenzied activity...

We remember those who struggle to believe in their own goodness...

We remember those who have lost their dreams and their enthusiasm for life...

We remember those who are experiencing failure in relationships and work situations...

We remember those who doubt their inner growth and who question their journey with God...

We remember those who never seem to get beyond financial worries and the pain of caring for the essentials of life...

We remember those who have been rejected, deserted, betrayed or abandoned...

We remember those who live in the grips of addiction and the throes of self-absorption...

We remember those who struggle for physical and spiritual wholeness...

We remember those who have lost hope and who daily seek a reason to live...

God, the very breath of life, there are moments when we feel like the dry bones filling Ezekiel's valley. When those times come upon us, help us to trust in you, to believe in your dance of life in us. Do not allow us to lose heart or to abandon hope. Take the dry bones of our lives and enliven them in a way we have never dreamed possible. Bless our dry and dusty spirits with your deep and stirring love. Renew our dreams. Fill us with enthusiasm for life. May we always look to you as our source of life. Amen.