

Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year A, RCL
March 29, 2020

Ezekiel 37:1-14
Romans 8:6-11
John 11:1-45
Psalm 130

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The Breath of Life

What an incredibly strange and frightening time we find ourselves in these days. It seems the whole world is sheltering in place as doctors, nurses, technicians, first responders, scientists, manufacturers, armed forces, and government officials work frantically to stem the tide of the COVID 19 pandemic. Grocery store clerks, delivery drivers and food service workers are hustling to keep up with the growing demand for the necessities of life, with toilet paper and Purell hand sanitizer at the top of everyone's shopping list. Social distancing, a newly minted term that grew out of this global health crisis, and frequent 20-second hand washing routines regulate our lives and how we interact with each other and the world. I watch an old movie and I find myself cringing when the actors are less than 6 feet apart, shaking hands or, heaven forbid, giving a hug or a kiss.

I am in awe of the heroes who are on the front lines fighting this global crisis. Healthcare workers are risking their lives and their families' lives every day, working in overcrowded hospitals while making due with shortages of PPE, personal protective equipment and ventilators. They are actively saving lives while we are doing our part to "flatten the curve," sequestered within the four walls of our homes, apartments or condos. Some with immediate family members and some alone. Some with access to the outside world through the wonders of the internet and some that must do without.

This scourge has brought our fast-paced and over-scheduled lives to a stretching halt. Offices are closed, stores are darkened and church pews are empty. Fewer cars are on the roads, and rush hour now just a memory. School closures have transformed living rooms into classrooms. Many parents are struggling to balance working from home while keeping their children on task with their online lessons. As the economy shuts down, a record number of people suddenly find themselves without a job or health insurance, not knowing how they will pay the rent or mortgage and provide for their loved ones. And, then there are those who are most vulnerable and just barely hanging on even in the best of times. The homeless, the destitute and those battling addiction and mental illness - their support network of self-help groups, AA meetings, feeding programs and homeless shelters have shrunk or are non-existent for the duration of this pandemic. In short, in a

few short weeks our lives have been turn upside down. And we know that we have not seen the worst of it yet.

So, what are we to do? How do we as Christians live in this time of fear and anxiety? Where do we turn to find the courage and hope we need to face the reality of our lives today?

One thing we do as people of God is we look to Holy Scripture to comfort and guide us through the many trials and tribulations of this life, as Christians have done for thousands of years. Our reading from the ancient prophet Ezekiel is a powerful example of God meeting us where we are as we long for a glimmer of hope in these dark days.

Ezekiel, whose name means “God strengthens,” is no stranger to hardship and tragedy. This priest and prophet survived the destruction and plundering of the Temple and Jerusalem over 2,500 years ago only to be exiled to the foreign land with his fellow Jews. During his time of captivity in Babylon, Ezekiel prophesies about renewed hope that can only come from God. His prophesy of the valley of the dry bones goes right to the core of what it means to totally depend upon God. Our God is the same God that not only gives life but restores life; a full and abundant life that will not be overcome, not even by death.¹

This stark and graphic vision of dry human bones scattered in the valley of the desert reveals a sense of death, longing and despair. The refugees have lost heart and their spirit has died.² It seems impossible that the Israelites will ever find their way back to their homeland. “By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and wept...How could we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” (Psalm 137:1,4).

We are in a strange land today. How easy it is to despair when we are afraid and feeling separated from God. This is when it is vital to remember that we are people of God. Therefore, we are not alone. As Ezekiel stands in the valley surrounded by all these dry bones it is God who calls out to him, “Can these dry bones live?” (Ezekiel 37:3). The prophet wisely responds, “O Lord God, you know” (v. 3b). For this is the God of creation, the God who made heaven and earth and all that is in it (Acts 17:24). So God instructs Ezekiel to prophesize to the bones. He does and the bones begin to rattle about and they are transformed into bodies of real flesh and blood. Yet, they still have no breath. Then, God commands Ezekiel to prophesy to the breath of God and when he does, God’s breath comes upon them, resuscitating these lifeless bodies and filling them with new life.

Today, we stand in our own valley of dry bones, surrounded by uncertainty and fear. Yet, even though we don’t know how things will turn out, we do not despair. For we place our hope in the one, true living God, who stands with us in this desolate valley. The very One who gives us the breath of life. “I will cause this breath to enter you and you shall live” (v. 5).

¹ James A. Wallace, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, vol. 2*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster), 2010, p. 125-127.

² Kelton Cobb, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, vol. 2*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster), 2010, p. 122.

In John's gospel we see the breath of God raise Lazarus from the grave. Even though the story of Lazarus' resurrection, a foreshadowing of Jesus' own death and resurrection, is about the promise of eternal life, it does not skip over the devastation and pain we experience when someone we love dies. Jesus openly weeps when he sees the body of his friend, Lazarus, as he stands with his sisters, Martha and Mary, outside his tomb. Despite their disappointment and anger that Jesus did not come sooner, they know they can turn to him for comfort. We see Jesus in all of his humanity, deeply moved and revealing a most compassionate and loving God that suffers when we suffer. In a short time Jesus himself will reveal how eternal life comes out of death. "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). Jesus' promise of eternal life is what sustains us even though we may walk through the valley of the shadow of death. And, as people of faith, we walk through this valley together.

I never cease to be amazed how resilient is the human spirit when come together – even while remaining 6 feet apart. This resiliency comes from God breathing the breath of life into our weary souls when we fear all is lost. In Italy, the epicenter of the coronavirus in Europe, people are coming together in spirit despite being confined to their homes and apartments. They stand on their balconies in the evening, clapping, cheering and singing their favorite songs. I have seen videos of musicians and opera singers join in, spontaneously sharing their musical gifts to give hope to each other that death will not defeat them. In the UK last night, people from all over broke into applause from balconies and doorways to show their support and gratitude for the incredible work healthcare workers are doing for those infected with the coronavirus. Here in our country, people from different states and neighborhoods are reaching out in unique and loving ways. Yesterday, I heard about a woman who wrote her name and telephone number on several post-it notes, and she walked around her neighborhood, placing the notes on her neighbors' doors inviting them to contact her if they needed help. Here at St. John's we have formed a telephone tree and vestry members are calling every member of congregation to see how they are getting along. Many parishioners have volunteered to shop and deliver groceries for those unable to leave their homes. Several times a week, folks are getting online to be part of our weekday prayer services. This is the breath of God filling us with new life – a life that only God can give us. This is where we, as people of God, find hope as we make our way through this strange land together.

Amen.