

Dunbarton NH Congregational Church
Sunday, March 9, 2008
10:30 a.m.

Lent V-A
John 11:1-44
Ezekiel 37:1-14

“God’s Breath”

I had such a difficult time choosing between our two fabulous texts today: Ezekiel’s raising of the dry bones, and Jesus’ raising of Lazarus from the dead! Both scripts have excellent Hollywood potential. First we have the prophet Ezekiel, exiled in Babylon (modern day Iraq) along with 5,000 other elite Jews during the siege of Jerusalem in 598 BCE. The hand of the Lord has come upon him, and in an ecstatic state Ezekiel is transported to a vast plain, a valley filled with old dry human bones—perhaps a battlefield of some kind. God speaks to Ezekiel, “Mortal,” which in Hebrew is *A-DAWM*, like Adam, meaning *all* of humankind, “Can these bones live?”

What, my friends, would you say if God asked you this question? If you could see the vast valley of dry bones that litter the landscape of your life, how would you reply to God’s question, “Can these bones live again?” Now some of you may be thinking, “I don’t have any bones.” Yet I ask you to consider the relationships severed by your neglect, the hopes and dreams murdered by your cynicism, the fragile egos cut to size by your thoughtlessness or indignation, or the opportunities killed by your apathy. Think of the quality of your yesterdays, terminally lost in the aftermath of your busyness. There they are, you see, stretched out before *all* of us, which is why God asks *all* of us the question—what do *you* believe?

Ezekiel responds as we might respond: “O Sovereign LORD, you alone know whether or not bones can live.” That’s a perfectly polite answer when it comes to God, but it is woefully insufficient. God thunders at Ezekiel, “*You*, prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life.’”

So Ezekiel prophesies as he is commanded. And as he is prophesying, there is a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones come together, bone to bone. Ezekiel looks, astonished, as tendons and flesh appear on them and skin covers them, *but* there is no breath in them. They are still dead.

Then God says this fabulous thing to Ezekiel, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’” So Ezekiel prophesies as God commands him to do, and breath enters them; they come to life and stand up on their feet—a vast army. Bones standing on their feet, an ancient metaphor for the stamina it takes to stand up to life’s difficulties.

Now I want to digress here to let you know that not wanting to miss out on the yoga craze that is captivating my friends and the women of this church, I bought myself a DVD last month. Every Monday and Wednesday when Bill goes off to class, I don my loose fitting clothes, shift a few tables and chairs, and join my video host in the fine art of contortion right there on my yoga mat in the living room. I admire this spiritual practice and can do the stretches pretty well. What I can't seem to do, however, is correctly breathe, which every yoga student knows is everything. When I stretch into the down dog position, am I supposed to breathe out or in? How about cobra or warrior three? More often than not, my deep cleansing breaths are backwards or punctuated by short gasps which I fear are ruining the whole effect.

You know, God understands everything about right breathing; God's spirit *is* breath, ru'ah in Hebrew means both things, spirit and breath, the life force of the universe. Breath is the first thing that fills our lungs at birth and the last thing to depart our bodies at the moment of our death. Breath is given, and breath is taken away, but the true breath of the living God falls eternally on us. You see, the yoga masters have it just right after all; correct breathing is *mindful* breathing, a state in which the source of life is exquisitely recognized and honored.

Now to story number two and Jesus, who once again in John's gospel is performing a miracle to demonstrate his power to a squadron of doubting disciples. I must say, this story is a little over the top for me. When his dear friend Mary sends word that her beloved brother Lazarus is gravely ill, Jesus dallies for two days before leaving. "If I raise Lazarus' 'dry bones' from the dead, it will really wow the crowd," he strategizes. When he finally makes an appearance in Bethany, Lazarus has been dead for four days. Now four is a significant number since a person's spirit was believed to hang around for only three days after death. In short, Lazarus is beyond hope.

It's not a pretty scene. The disciples are confused. Martha and the crowds are inconsolable. Mary is so upset she won't even come to meet Jesus, and Lazarus in the tomb isn't smelling too great. Next to the cross, this has to be the loneliest moment in Jesus' life, don't you think? There is nothing worse than hurting someone you love for their own good, right? To cruelly manipulate his closest friends, to cause so many so much pain, it's just too much. And so we are told that "Jesus weeps," the shortest verse in the Bible. I love Jesus so much in this moment of heartbreak.

My friends, to what lengths must God go to convince us who Christ is? What miracles must he perform to persuade us of his light and life giving power? Through him, Ezekiel breathes life into a valley of dry bones. Through Jesus he calls Lazarus back to life, fills him once again with ru'ah, with Spirit, with breath.

Next Sunday begins our Holiest of Weeks. Christians all over the world, 2.6 billion of us, will retell and remember the most passionate story of our faith. Jesus will enter triumphantly and die despicably on a Roman cross. Then miracle of miracles, he will rise and return, in body and in spirit, which is what life and breath and resurrection are all about.

So what will we do with our own fields of bones, my friends? Is not God inviting us to speak to the wind, to call forth God's restorative spirit in his name? Is not Jesus teaching us passionately before his own passion that we too can experience new life if we but seek it in his name?

As we begin this last leg of our Lenten journey, I hope that each day you will find a quiet place to breathe mindfully—in the car, preparing dinner, or simply sitting in your chair in the living room. Twelve mindful breaths, that’s all. I hope that with each breath you will consider God’s gift of breath, God’s gift of life, and all the dead dry bones, relationships, hopes, dreams, egos, opportunities and time killed by your busyness and thoughtlessness and skepticism. There they are, these bones, stretched out before you and all the rest of us, which is why God asks all of us the question—can these bones live again? Can the things in your life that need raising be raised? Ezekiel says yes, and Lazarus says yes, and Jesus says yes, and God says yes, and we’d better hurry up and believe in that “yes” before it’s too late and we run out of breath.

Inhale your prayers, my friends, or exhale them. It doesn’t matter. You will *always* be rewarded for the effort of your practice.

Amen.

Rev. Cynthia E. Bagley

Ezekiel 37:1-14 (New International Version)

The Valley of Dry Bones

1 The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. 2 He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. 3 He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"

I said, "O Sovereign LORD, you alone know."

4 Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! 5 This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. 6 I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.' "

7 So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. 8 I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

9 Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.' " 10 So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

11 Then he said to me: "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.' 12 Therefore prophecy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. 13 Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. 14 I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.' "

John 11:1-45

The Death of Lazarus

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. 3 So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."

*4*When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." *5*Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. *6*Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.

*7*Then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

8"But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?"

*9*Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light. *10*It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light."

*11*After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up."

*12*His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." *13*Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

*14*So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, *15*and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

*16*Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Jesus Comforts the Sisters

*17*On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. *18*Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, *19*and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. *20*When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

21"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. *22*But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

*23*Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

*24*Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

*25*Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; *26*and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

27"Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

*28*And after she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." *29*When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. *30*Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. *31*When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

*32*When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. 34 "Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

35 Jesus wept.

36 Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

37 But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Jesus Raises Lazarus From the Dead

38 Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. 39 "Take away the stone," he said.

"But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days."

40 Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

41 So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. 42 I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me."

43 When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 44 The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."