

Just Breathe
Ezekiel 37:1-6
Rev. Dan Schumacher

Breathing is an unconscious thing... until it's not.

It's sort of like running the slides for the praise music on Sunday mornings. Nobody notices it or even knows who's doing it as long as everything goes just right. But the moment there's an issue, *everybody* notices, *everybody* turns around to see what's going on, *everybody* takes note.

Breathing is an unconscious thing. Nobody notices it, until there's an issue.

Recently I've been half-marathon training.

Since January first, I have been running again — slowly building a base, carefully coupling my training with physical therapy so as to avoid another lower back injury, and slowly but surely piling on the miles.

Three Saturdays ago, I ran ten miles. Two Saturdays ago, I ran eleven miles. Yesterday, I ran twelve. Based on that series of events, can you guess when my half-marathon was supposed to be?

That's right. It was supposed to be next Saturday, but, like so many events lately, it's been canceled. Don't worry. I still plan to run it. Christen has agreed to be my "mobile aid station." I'm sure that our two dogs will happily encourage me with waggly tails and lots of kisses at each stop. Heck, they may even decide to run a couple miles with me.

And when I finish my self-designed half marathon, I'm going to submit my time to the race organizers *virtually*. And the race organizers, for their part, have offered to mail me my medal once I do.

The thing about running again is that it has made me hyper aware of my *breathing*. Breathe too fast, and it throws the cadence of my steps off. Breathe too deeply, and I end up with a side stitch. Breathe too shallowly, and I don't get the oxygen that my muscles need.

The same is true for those who practice yoga. In fact many, high level yogis say that breathing is the most important part of yoga — not strength, not flexibility, but breath.

The same is also true for singing. Ask Victoria and she will tell you that the first thing she has to teach new singers is proper breath support. You can't hold that note for two or three measures without proper breath support.

Breathing is an unconscious thing... until it's not.

When Christen and I went to Las Vegas earlier this year, one of the highlights of the visit for me was visiting the “Human Bodies” exhibit. Through a process of plasticization, real human organs, limbs, and entire bodies are put on display as an educational experience. This particular exhibit was organized by the major systems of the body: the circulatory system, the digestive system, the reproductive system, the muscular system... the *respiratory* system.

In one case, there was a complete set of the bronchial tree — that series of tubes that conduct air from the throat into the lungs. It was suspended in place as if we were getting an Xray view of the interior of someone’s lungs, and, I have to tell you, it was magnificent. It looked exactly like a tree that had been turned on its head!

Suspended in another case were the vast networks of intermingling veins and arteries that fill the lungs and make up the part of our body that transfers air that’s been breathed in into the oxygen that goes out in our blood and supplies our bodies.

I was in awe. I felt like the the psalmist who wrote:

“For it was you who formed my inmost parts;
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made...” (Psalm 139:13-14).

And the whole exhibit was filled with wonderful commentary specific to each system.

Above a case that held a healthy, normal set of human lungs, was one such note that read: “The volume of air you breath each day can fill approximately 7 hot air balloons.”

Seven hot air balloons?! If you ever been to the Labor Day Lift-Off, you know how long it takes to fill even one of those balloons! Seven of those every day?? The image does bring new meaning to the phrase, “You’re full of hot air!” Though I suspect that some of us could fill eight hot air balloons each day...

Another such sign reminds observers of the significance of breath in religions across the world. For Christians, it is often associated and interpreted as the power of the Holy Spirit. For Jews, it is the spirit of God manifested in five parts: life, soul, personality, mind, and individuality. For Taoists it is the Qi (Chi): the very life-force that animates all.

Imagine how that translates for all of us — the importance of air, the essential and primal act of breathing, the practice of “taking a deep breath.”

If you think about it, it is the very first and the very last action we take while on this earth.

Breathing is an unconscious thing... until it’s not — which makes Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones particularly powerful today.

Ezekiel had been a priest of the Zadokite clan. The Zadokites were the order of priests whose very job was to serve in the temple in Jerusalem. The biblical scholar, James Kugel, suggests that this meant Ezekiel's daily life was concerned with ritual purity, with the maintenance of the temple, with the correct offering of animal sacrifices, and things of that nature (*How to Read the Bible*, 608).

But notice that I said, Ezekiel *had been* a priest. That *was* the case, but not any more.

You see, the holy city of Jerusalem had been ransacked by Babylon. Its king and many of its leaders, including Ezekiel, had been drug off into exile by the Babylonians. The city was torn down. The temple had been razed to the ground. Many of the people were drug unwillingly into foreign lands, separated from one another with no email, no Facebook, no mode of texting by which to keep in touch with their loved ones.

It seemed for many that this was the end of God's people. This was how God's people died.

And for Ezekiel's part... What's a priest to do with no temple to maintain? No animal sacrifices to regulate? No way to impart ritual purity?

God, however, was not done with Ezekiel yet. With no temple to serve, God called him to be prophet. Ezekiel was no longer a priest. Now he was a *visionary*.

And it's at this moment — at the very moment that seemed to be the death of God's people — that God put his hand on Ezekiel and showed him a vision:

It was a valley — a *low* place; a wilderness place; a desert.

And it was filled with bones — *dry* bones, sun-bleached and brittle; the bones of those who'd been long dead.

In the vision, God led Ezekiel all around those bones; made him take a good, hard look at them, and then asked him this: "Mortal," God said, "can these bones live?"

Ezekiel, for his part, is wise enough to know to keep his answer brief in the presence of God Almighty: "O Lord GOD, you know."

Does he mean, "*Only* you know, O God?"

Does he mean, "I obviously *don't* know, O God?"

Does he mean, "You know that I don't know how to answer that, O God?"

Whatever the case, God doesn't seem to mind Ezekiel's not-knowing. After all, it was God who brought this vision to Ezekiel because he had something important to show him.

God says to him, “Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: 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 I will cover you with skin, and I will put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD” (Ezekiel 37:5-6).

And then, as if this vision weren’t already crazy enough, Ezekiel watches as all of that unfolds exactly as God has said.

With clicking and rattling noises, bones snap back together each to its place. Sinews and tendons stretch across the old bones like tightening guitar strings before muscles wrap them up in their meaty fibers. And finally, skin stretches back over the exposed bodies...

But, they are not revived yet... because there is no *breath* in them.

The LORD instructs Ezekiel to call on the four winds to bring breath back into these bodies, and it is only once Ezekiel has done just that that they were alive.

After all of that, God finally explains what this vision is all about: “These bones are the whole house of Israel. My people may feel that their bones are dried up; that they are without hope; that they are cut off... [But it’s not true.] I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live” (Ezekiel 37:11, 14).

It’s quite easy to feel cut off right now, isn’t it? It’s quite easy to feel isolated and alone. It’s easy to look around and find “bones” wherever our eyes land.

Downtown is empty, and we wonder how those businesses will survive. Bones.

The stock market is volatile and our retirement has been obliterated. Bones.

Italy is burying a generation of people. Bones.

The schools that are usually filled with the energy and excitement of youth are abandoned. Bones.

I got my haircut a week ago Thursday. I was my barber’s very last cut before the injunction to cease all such services. She cried as she checked me out, because this isn’t just her livelihood; it’s part of who she *is*. More bones.

But there’s a funny thing about this passage. It’s the way it talks about *breath*.

The Hebrew word for breath is multidimensional. It most certainly means “breath,” but it can also mean “spirit” and “wind.” *Ruach* is the word.

And in this story *ruach* is used in all three of those ways.

- In the first verse of the chapter, it is the LORD's *ruach* or *spirit* that shows Ezekiel a vision of a valley of dry bones.
- In verses 6 and 7, these bones need not only sinews and muscles and skin to live, but also *ruach* or *breath*.
- In the ninth verse, the breath is to come from the four *ruach* or the four *winds*.
- And in verse 14, the LORD no longer says, "I will put my *breath* in you, that you may live," but, "I shall put my *spirit* within you, and you shall live."

Everywhere they looked the people of God saw only bones. But God had not abandoned them.

In fact, God shows Ezekiel this vision as a way of saying, "I am not far from you. I am close. I am as close as the wind on your face. I am as close as your next breath. In fact, my spirit is *within* you. You may feel cut off now, but it will not be forever — because I will never leave you, nor forsake you."

And here's the thing: that promise that God made to the whole of Israel, God makes to us, too.

The ancient mystics and monastics of the Christian faith — our desert mothers and fathers — got it. In fact, in order to enact this promise, they adopted the practice of *breath prayer*.

Breath prayer is a form of contemplative prayer linked with the rhythms of breathing. As you breathe in, you call on a biblical name or image of God. And as you breathe out, you make a simple confession of faith.

For instance, my favorite breathe prayer is this:

"Abba" as you breathe in.

"I belong to you" as you breathe out.

Can you see the power of it? Each breath you take is literally used to breathe in the presence of God.

And you repeat this several times as you breathe. The average human breathes sixteen times in a single minute. That's sixteen times a minute you can breathe in the presence of God.

You know, I've been thinking about breath all week long as I've contemplated this story from the book of Ezekiel. I've thinking about it as it relates to this grand, old sanctuary.

I used to think that the pump that pushes air through the organ was the lungs of this place. That pump works so hard to make this sanctuary sing with sounds of our organ, it made sense to me to think of it as our sanctuary's lungs.

But then one day, I was in here preparing the sanctuary for worship. I was standing down front on the top of one of our tall a-frame ladders working on one of our Moravian stars for Epiphany, and I turned and I looked out over the sanctuary, and it occurred to me how the empty pews looked like the bones of a rib cage.

It then it occurred to me that the pump that pushes air through the organ isn't the lungs of this old place. Rather, it's the people. The breath of God isn't a machine in the belly of the building. The breath of God is the people. And normally the doors open on Sunday and the building inhales the breath of God, and after an hour or two of praising God, it exhales them out into the open to be God's *wind* in this world.

For now, the physical building — the sanctuary — is something akin to Ezekiel's valley of dry bones. It has everything it needs, but *breath*. But God's promise to us stands today just as true as it stood for the people back then.

God looks at our empty sanctuary and the empty sanctuaries all over the world in this moment and God says: "I will cause *breath* to enter you, and you shall live [again.]"

Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow — but soon.

And until then, *breathe*. Just *breathe*.

Just take a deep *breath* — because God is only as far away as your next *breath*.

Amen.