

## “Breathing Life into These Old Bones”

Lent Midweek 4

Ezekiel 37:1-14

March 18, 2015

We have come quite a distance from Ash Wednesday, when we were reminded that we were but dust to this valley of dry bones that can be brought back to life with the breath of God – bone joined to bone, then sinew and skin. This vision from Ezekiel will forever bring to my senses the smell of talcum powder from the various dancers at our Easter Vigil who have brought this reading to life.

In reality being taken to a valley full of dry bones would be rather eerie, I would think – and I’m a person who has always liked graveyards. It was quite near here in Maple Grove, Minnesota that I used to play hide-and-seek in the cemetery behind St. John Lutheran Church where my Uncle Pfofy was the pastor. He and my Aunt Lydia both died within a year or two of our move to Minnesota and are now in that graveyard. I used to go to their graves when CLS was there for the fall soccer tournament. When I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade I would go for walks with my girlfriend, Chris Klug, in an old country cemetery that had been swallowed up by suburban Milwaukee. We would hold hands, walk her dog, and read grave stones. Doing 30+ funerals some years in our years in the Chicago area with a large congregation with many older members at Concordia Cemetery (yes, there is one – and it was started by Lutheran congregations) I had whole neighborhoods of people I buried – precious souls I’d come to know, love and then had to bury “in the sure and certain hope of the Resurrection.”

I mention that because I believe it is important to make Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones personal – not to separate it as a vision from long ago after Ezekiel had some kind of extra-terrestrial experience. The Sovereign Lord calls these bones, “my people” – you don’t yet know them, their stories, all the things that God brought them through but when all God’s people are raised – when God’s RUACH – breath of life raises them to life eternal those who were slain, those people, as individuals will be known to you, just as those whom you love who have died in the Lord whose graves or whose memories you carry in your heart will be among that throng praising God.

At the time of this prophesy the Israelites were in captivity in Babylon – the life they’d known, the land that had been their own – all taken away. Torn away from their temple mount and worship it was as if their faith and life had dried up and they were but dry bones. God promises them that they, His people, will have a life, a land of their own once again. Would all of those hearing this prophesy experience that? No – some would die before it ever happened. It was not a guarantee to each individual but a promise to a nation that they – God’s people would experience this promised new and restored life with God.

Put more simply I’m sure that many of you, like me, are getting older, experiencing increasing limitations, feel certain aspects or quality in life ebbing. Perhaps your dry valley of dusty bones is something you’re experiencing in your career, your relationships – all so frustratingly dry and dismal – all in need of a breath of fresh/life-giving air – but God’s promise of new life – life with God – a rich life among God’s people all the days of our life, nurtured by the Word and in the fellowship of God’s people is ours. When Aaron breathed the blessing on the Children of Israel they were to breathe in that blessing to take with them until the next time they worshiped. When Jesus was with his disciples before the Ascension he breathed on them so they could breathe in the breath of the Holy Spirit that comes to us in our baptism. Breath – the breath of life is an important concept from the very first time God breathed life into Adam.

The Hebrew word, RUACH, the breath of life, has always been particularly visceral for me – like the smell of talcum powder but this is a sound. RUACH – it sounds like the first gasp of breath a baby makes at birth and, often, the sound of the last rattle of breath when a person dies. Both of those are breaths we are guaranteed to experience in life – unless the soon return of Jesus keeps us from that last gasp. But I would contend that even then the first breath of eternity for all who are alive. That first gasp in the presence of the Living Christ returned will be the ultimate RUACH – a breath that we can only faintly imagine.

Until then –well, God is with us, in us, always near to surprise us with new life springing from the baptismal waters that have claimed us as God’s own and refreshing new possibilities in the midst of our challenges, struggles and long dry periods. May our Lenten prayer echo these words of Edwin Hatch from 1878:

Breathe on me, Breath of God,  
Fill me with life anew,  
That I may love what Thou dost love,

And do what Thou wouldst do.

Breathe on me, Breath of God,  
So shall I never die,  
But live with Thee the perfect life  
Of Thine eternity.

AMEN.