

April 3, 2016
John 20
‘Breathing Exercises’

The room was full of pregnant women and their partners, and the class was in full swing. The instructor was teaching the women how to breathe properly, along with informing the men how to give the necessary assurances at this stage of the plan.

The teacher then announced, “Ladies, exercise is good for you. Walking is especially beneficial. And, gentlemen, it wouldn’t hurt you to take the time to go walking with your partner! And help her learn these breathing exercises.”

The room really got quiet. Finally, a man in the middle of the group raised his hand. “Yes?” replied the teacher. “Is it all right if she carries a golf bag while we walk?”

One thing we all do and take for granted is our breathing. We do it so effortlessly and without any thought at all. It just happens. But our breathing is very powerful. When we focus on our breathing we can effect our mood and our health. Our breath carries power. To breathe is to live.

And this is what we see in scripture. For it was the breath of God that flowed across the world and the formless void creating life. In the book of Job we read how, “the breath of the Almighty has given life”. And in our reading from Ezekiel, we read how it was the breath of God that brought life to the valley of dry bones.

It is clear that there is something special about breath. And that’s why there are two Hebrew words for it. Nesamah which means life force or inspiration. And Ruach or the creative life giving force of God. Basically, when God breathes, life happens.

And this is what we see so powerfully in Ezekiel. For in this reading, we need to remember the time when the Israelites were living in exile as a defeated people, living in a foreign land. In the midst of their hopelessness, God comes to Ezekiel in a powerful vision of the valley of dry bones. A valley of bones dried out by a lack of hope. Dried out because the Israelites, displaced, disappointed, grieving what once was, are going through the motions of living but their spirits are dead. And so in this field of dry bones that is the crushed spirit of a people, God says to Ezekiel, “Mortal, can these bones live?” Can there be life again.

It's so easy to lose heart and hope, to assume that things have gone too far. It's too late; there's nowhere to turn. To assume it's over.

A young woman drives away from her doctor's office, fighting the tears. Having felt as though everything depended on having another child, the result of the test is overwhelming: she'll never be pregnant again.

Can these bones live?

A middle aged man stares out the third-story window of his office building, weary of his work, bored with his life, remembering springtimes filled with baseball mitts and old carburetors, with love notes and pretty girls. And now he's not looking forward to anything.

Can these bones live?

A woman reaches behind the jumbled spices for her pills, hands shaking. All she wants is enough to get herself relaxed before the kids get home from school. Maybe she'll go to a meeting again in the fall. Or when the kids are older. Or when... there was another good excuse, but she can't recall it just now.

Can these bones live?

A young man is washing blood from the floor of a home in Syria. His brother was killed in the slaughter. He sent his wife and children with those who were fleeing and he's not heard from her since. He stares at the floor. The blood's not coming up; it's in too deep.

Can these bones live?

And the powerful life giving answer comes back with a resounding yes! And God says, "I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live. And breath came into them and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live."

You see, it is the breath of God that gives to us all new life. The breath of God puts flesh and spirit upon dry and dusty bones, so that they may live again, so that we know there is always hope, and there is always a way out of pain and sorrow.

For this is what the disciples experienced. The resurrection has happened but the disciples don't know it yet. And so they are huddled in a room located on some forgotten alley of Jerusalem. A room that was probably heavy with stale air. The doors shut and locked. The openings that passed for windows were covered and tacked down. The candles flickered shadows against those dark mud/brick walls. If you have ever walked into an old house that has been shut up for any length of time, with sheets draped over ancient, worn-out furniture, you know the smell. Moldy. Musty.

The room was heavy with the mood of staleness, stifling the ability to breathe normally. That handful of would-be disciples had difficulty catching their breath, for fear: fearing for their own lives; fearing the worst; fearing the future, without the presence of their Rabbi-Master-

Messiah; fearing their own relationships, already suspicious of one another. Can they really trust one another any longer? Wondering silently, can these bones live?

And in that moment, Jesus comes to them and says, "Peace be with you." and then "He breathed on them," and it was like a breath of fresh air. When that breath was felt, things changed and lives changed. They could feel the wind & spirit as if they were throwing open the windows for a spring-time airing of a house closed for months against the cold and dark of winter.

The act of breathing on them was followed in the same motion with the words that was the gift. "Receive the Holy Spirit!" as Jesus says to them "Here is the gift of life, which will be like a breath of fresh air to a stale world. For in receiving this gift, you receive my spirit,"

Now, with that joy, boldness, courage and purpose, the disciples move out from behind their locked doors. As the recipients of this gift – their perspective was changed – their faith was lit aflame – and those disciples walked out of that room, and into the world as a community invigorated for the task that awaited. For Jesus had said: "I send you." For they, and now we, are commissioned to be about the work of forgiveness, the "ministry of reconciliation" – the work of sharing the Good News and new life found in Christ. For Jesus says "If you forgive someone's sins, they're gone for good. If you don't forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?" In other words – let go and breathe – leg go and step into this new life I give you.

We are to let go of our grudges, our regrets, our hurts, our mistakes. Because if we don't, what will we do with them? I would urge you today, to breathe them out.

To practice and live out our breathing exercises. To breathe in grace and breathe out fear. To breath in love and breathe out hate. To breathe in hope and breathe out anxiety. To breathe in new life and let our bones, our lives, our faith - live again with power and purpose.

I can share with you a story of a man I knew named Jerry who was my boss when I worked in the business world. He was the director of our office. He was smart and focused but also really self-centered. He refused to give up control of anything. We all knew what decisions would be made and direction we would go in as an office. We would go in any direction that increased Jerry's power and earned him more credit. Because when things went right, even though others played a major part, he took all the credit and when things went wrong, even when they were his decisions and actions, everyone else was blamed but him. And not surprisingly things increasingly went wrong, and he placed more and more blame, became more and more angry. And in then end, Jerry lost the support of his colleagues, lost his friends, lost his job, and lost his family. But he held on tight to all his bitterness and anger. He just continued to blame everyone but himself. He just wouldn't breathe in what could have helped and let go of what was ripping his life apart. As Jesus said, if you don't forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?

In our lives we all know someone like Jerry and maybe we have even been Jerry at one time or another. Someone who holds on so tight to regrets and anger, to bitterness and negativity, to mistakes and pain that their world closes in so tight – their lives dry up and we ask, can these bones live?

Well, I ran into Jerry a few years ago. He heard I had become a pastor and called me up. I hesitantly went to breakfast still remembering all the times he had chewed me out. And so I

went, and it was great. Jerry was a completely new man. After hitting the lowest point in his life, he took a breath and took a step in prayer to get help which led him to a support group and that support group helped get into a church group. And over time, he learned to breathe it all out. He learned to live again, to let go and not be in control all the time. Jerry found a new love in his life, mended his relationship with his kids, and learned the hardest lesson there is: to forgive others and most of all yourself. He learned how to breathe –really breathe the breath of new life and faith.

And so the lesson is clear – we all need to practice our breathing exercises. We need to find time and make time, to regularly through prayer, through worship, through service & mission, through small groups breathe in God, breathe in mercy, breathe in forgiveness and breathe out all that is weighing heavy on our hearts. We need to let go. So that not only do our bones live but also with all our heart, our passion, our joy, our excitement we are fully alive – fully living out our faith making a difference in someone’s life every day we are blessed to wake up and draw breath.

For can these bones live? The breath of Christ is the answer to that question – for the breath of Christ is the breath of the resurrection. Of continual new life, new beginnings, and endless hope if we will only turn our lives around and turn them toward him. We can not just breathe once in awhile, or we will die. And our faith life has to be the same way. If we don’t live out our faith, it will go stale. We can not just pray, or take time to be with Christ once in a while or we will spiritually die. We have to be committed to regularly and continually breathing, and living, and praying, and being disciples of Christ who are in mission to the community around us.

And so what else is there to say but, “Breathe on me, Breath of God and fill me with life anew, that I may love what you love, and do what you would do. Breathe on me, Breath of God till I am wholly yours, till all this earthly part of me glows with your fire divine.” The breath of God is all around us. Waiting for us to take the time to breathe it in. So let us breathe in the breath of God and live, really live. Let us breathe and be inspired. And be alive. Amen.