

Breathing in Spirit-Space
5th Sunday of Lent
March 29, 2020
Trinity Bixby
Rev. Lucus Levy Keppel

[Ezekiel 37:1-14 \(NLT\)](#)
[Romans 8:6-11 \(CEB\)](#)

2616 years and 13 days. That's how long it's been since Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, and the time of Exile began. Big, world-changing events have a tendency to burn themselves into the historical record, which is why we know the exact day of Jerusalem's fall – March 16, 597 BCE. And one of the people who would leave the city that day was a young man, a priest-in-training, named Ezekiel, meaning "God Will Strengthen." Ezekiel needed all the strength he could get – being forced to walk from Jerusalem, north to Damascus, then east along the Euphrates to Babylon. A journey of around a thousand kilometers – or just over 600 miles. About a quarter of the population of Judah was forced to take that same route, and it upended everything the people thought they knew about life. For generations, they had taught that God – the one God of the whole universe – resided in the temple at Jerusalem. If you wanted to worship God, you had to be at the temple. God was there, so you should be to. But now... now the temple was destroyed. If that wasn't enough of a shake-up, the destruction of the temple meant that many of the written scrolls containing the Torah had been destroyed or taken as loot. Fortunately, there was still a strong tradition of memorizing the Torah, and the scrolls could be rewritten. But Ezekiel kept receiving cryptic visions from God, urging him to write them down. At one point, he records asking God, "Am I a travelling salesman of riddles?" His visions are of striking, strange images, like the wheel of fire, or today's focus: the valley of dry bones.

Now, these bones represent a popular expression, an idiom in Hebrew. If you were a Hebrew-speaker who was feeling down and hopeless – like, say after being forced into exile – you would say, "My bones are dry." It means, hope has gone

away. A valley full of dry bones shows a loss of hope and vitality in a wide area, throughout the community. Things could no longer be done the same way they always had, when such a large community was losing hope.

But in the vision, God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones. As he does so, the bones join together, restoring a basic shape and being re-covered with flesh. But these flesh-covered bones are not yet living. Just existing is not enough. God tells Ezekiel to speak to the winds – to the *ruach*, the spirit. This wind, this *ruach*, this spirit – it is God’s breath, filling the fleshed bones with life. What was once hopeless, is now filled with God’s hope-filled breath. This is Breathing in Spirit-Space.

Things were horrible at the outset of the time of exile, but just as God had spoken through Ezekiel, that initial hopelessness gave way to a time of reconnecting with God and with each other. Letters from Jerusalem reached the exiles in Babylon, reminding them of their connection. The scripture texts that had been memorized were written down – and even adapted to use the Imperial Babylonian script, a variant of Aramaic that worked better for writing on scrolls, rather than on stone monuments. Theology moved in completely new ways, as exiles argued with each other, and even with folks back at home. Many of those arguments were preserved, just as the scriptures were – and helped people to make sense of the place they were living. Some of the exiles, like Daniel, Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael, were able to make an impact on the kings of Babylon by their faithful living. Breathing in Spirit-Space means making the best of where you are – “seeking the shalom of the city [of exile]” as Jeremiah puts it.

In exile, the people found out how important their connections were. As soon as they were able, they strengthened those connections, recognizing that God was still with them, and they were still able to worship, even if it was in new ways. God’s breath of life – the *ruach* – renewed and resurrected them, just as God’s Spirit renews and resurrects us today. We may be isolated and distant from each other physically, but we have so many tools to reconnect – from phone calls to letters, from video conferences to online worship – God’s Spirit can make even our dry

bones reconnect, refresh, and reinvigorate.

Not surprisingly, this is the theme that Paul picked up when writing to the church in Rome. Paul was physically in the city, after all – but he was under house arrest, and could only meet with one or two people at a time. Yet, even in that forced isolation, Paul wrote to the church in Rome, “If Christ is in you, the Spirit is your life because of God’s righteousness. If the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your human bodies also, through his Spirit that lives in you.” In other words, it doesn’t matter if you’re alone or in a group of thousands – God’s Spirit will live in you just as you live in God. But, Paul warns, if you are selfish – if you care only for yourself – then you are acting as though the Spirit of God does not live in you. We have choices in life – choices to act in love and grace for each other, and choices to be selfish, to hoard things, to not care for others as long as “you get yours.”

Even if it should go without saying: Make good choices. Find ways to connect with friends and loved ones that keep you safe – and when we do finally return to personal contact, let’s cherish every handshake, every hug as we pass the peace of Christ. For the Spirit of the One who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to you. Even if you’re a thousand kilometers from home. Even if you are under house arrest. Even if you’re wandering the wilderness of social distancing. Through it all, keep breathing in Spirit-Space, knowing that God is with you.

May you be a conduit for the Holy Spirit. May the breath of God fill you with energy and may you prophesy to your people that yes, there is hope! And may Christ’s love lead you to make good choices, connecting and reinvigorating despite physical distance.