

WORSHIP CONTENT ELEMENTS FOR SUNDAY, MARCH 29, 2020

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

5th SUNDAY in LENT

GATHERING

CALL TO WORSHIP *(based on Ezekiel 37 and Psalm 130)*

One: O mortal, can these bones live?

All: **Only the Lord God knows.**

One: O people, hope in the Lord.

All: **We bring our doubts and fears, our work and worries,
to this time of reflection and refreshment.**

One: O people, hope in the Lord.

All: **With the Lord there is steadfast love
and great power to redeem.**

***OPENING HYMN** "Come, Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove" GtG 279

1. **Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly Dove,
with all Thy quickening powers;
kindle a flame of sacred love
in these cold hearts of ours.**

2. **In vain we tune our formal songs;
in vain we strive to rise;
hosannas languish on our tongues,
and our devotion dies.**

3. **Dear Lord, and shall we ever live
at this poor dying rate?
Our love so faint, so cold to thee,
and Thine to us so great!**

4. **Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly Dove,
with all Thy quickening powers;
come, shed abroad a Savior's love,
and that shall kindle ours.**

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***UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

We confess, O God, that we have not been as open as you intend to the winds of the Spirit. There are times when we merely exist, as if the tomb had already closed us in. We have hoarded your bounty without thankfulness or generosity. We have set

our minds on having things our way and ignored your intentions for us. O God, forgive our foolish ways. Breathe into us once more the breath of life, that we may walk before you in the land of the living. Amen.

***SILENT CONFESSION**

***ASSURANCE OF PARDON** *(based on Psalm 51)*

One: Our God is a God of grace, quick to forgive and ready to recreate in us pure hearts and loving spirits. So take to heart the good news; believe it, live it.

All: **For by the grace of God we are loved and accepted, forgiven and restored through Jesus Christ our Lord. Alleluia! Amen.**

***RESPONSE OF PRAISE** “Halle, Halle, Hallelujah!” *(refrain)* GtG 591

Halle, Halle, Halleluja!

Halle, Halle, Halleluja!

Halle, Halle, Halleluja!

Halleluja! Halleluja!

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THE WORD

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

O Lord, we wait for you,
and in your Word we trust.
By the power of your Spirit,
set our hearts and minds
on the source of life and peace:
Jesus Christ our Savior. **Amen.**

SCRIPTURE READINGS

EZEKIEL 37:1-14 (New Revised Standard Version+)

Introduction: Ezekiel has a vision from God: a vision of his people’s plight, as they wallow in exile in a foreign land; and a vision of God’s response.

An additional note: The Hebrew word *ruach* is used 10 times in this passage.

The word can be translated “breath”; it can also be translated “wind” or “spirit.”

Context makes a difference in how it is translated each time. As we seek to understand this word’s use in the passage, I think it is important to recognize that, even when we might translate the word as “breath,” there is still the sense of “wind” and “spirit” behind the meaning of the word. And when we translate the word as “spirit,” there’s always the sense of “breath” and “wind” behind the meaning of the word. As a way to remind us of the triple meaning at play with this word, I have chosen to use “breath-spirit-wind” each time the word *ruach* occurs in the passage.

1 The hand of the Lord came upon me, and brought me out by the spirit-wind-breath of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. 2 The Lord led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. 3 The Lord said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, only you know." 4 Then the Lord said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. 5 Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath-spirit-wind to enter you, and you shall live. 6 I will put sinews on you, place flesh on you, and cover you with skin, and I will put breath-spirit-wind in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord."

7 So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. 8 I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had appeared on them and skin had covered them; but there was no breath-spirit-wind in them. 9 Then the Lord said to me, "Prophecy to the breath-spirit-wind, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath-spirit-wind: Thus says the Lord God: Come, O breath-spirit-wind, come from the four wind-spirit-breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." 10 I prophesied as the Lord commanded me, and the breath-spirit-wind entered them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

11 Then the Lord said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is gone; we are cut off, finished completely.' 12 Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. 13 And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 14 I will put my spirit-wind-breath within you, and you shall live, and I will plant you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act," says the Lord.

JOHN 11:1-45 (New Revised Standard Version+)

Introduction: The story we read from the 11th chapter of John takes place shortly before Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem -- what we will celebrate as Palm Sunday next week. Jesus receives disconcerting news from some friends, but delays his response, leading to potentially dire consequences...and amazing revelations.

1 A certain man, Lazarus, was ill. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (2 This was the Mary who anointed the Lord with fragrant oil and wiped his feet with her hair. Her brother Lazarus was ill.) 3 So the sisters sent word to Jesus, saying, "Lord, the one whom you love is ill." 4 But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." 5 Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, 6 after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

7 Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." 8 The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jewish opposition was just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" 9 Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. 10 But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." 11 After

saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." 12 The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will get well." 13 Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. 14 Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. 15 For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." 16 Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

17 When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. 18 Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, 19 and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. 20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary remained in the house. 21 Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 Even now I know that whatever you ask God, God will give you." 23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." 24 Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." 25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" 27 She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

28 When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling 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 were comforting Mary in the house saw her get up quickly and leave, they followed her. They assumed she was going to mourn at the tomb. 32 When Mary arrived 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 came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. 34 He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." 35 Jesus wept. 36 So 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?"

38 Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 39 Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." 40 Jesus said to her, "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 have said this for the benefit of the crowd standing here, so 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 bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Untie him, and let him go."

45 Therefore, many of the Jews who came with Mary and saw what Jesus did believed in him.

SERMON “Catch the Wind” by Pastor Bill Vincent

This vision of a valley of dry bones is so appropriate for this Sunday!

When I realized that this was one of the passages for today, it almost took my breath away...literally!

Because isn't that, in some ways, exactly what we are experiencing right now -- having our breath taken away.

Now when I say that, I don't want to be seen as being flippant regarding the effects of the coronavirus on people's bodies. It is, in many ways, a respiratory illness, is it not? So please, do not misunderstand me when I speak of 'having our breath taken away'; I don't mean to make light of the symptoms, and the suffering -- not in any way, shape, or form.

Still there is this image in our passage that speaks: speaks to me, speaks to us, speaks to our situation: 'having our breath taken away'.

Our very lives, and in many cases, our very livelihoods are so very different. It takes our breath away.

The changes that have occurred in our way of life, and the speed with which those changes have occurred -- in a matter of weeks, if not days -- in some cases, it sucks the very life out of you. This is not life as we have come to expect it!

And yes, there is the economy, affecting us all. So much of our economy, with all its ripple effects, has had the breath knocked out of it.

And then we read this story -- this outlandish vision -- from Ezekiel, about *breath-spirit-wind* being blown into bone-dry skeletons, lifeless bodies; and...Wow! How timely!

Now, let's be clear regarding the original context for this passage/vision. The people to whom these words were originally addressed were not experiencing a pandemic, but the pandemonium of exile: uprooted from their homes and their homeland; displaced to a foreign, faraway land; feeling despondent, despairing; 'what's the use?'

Sound vaguely familiar?

And then Ezekiel has this vision. God shows him the dry bones of the people and their lives.

And God also shows Ezekiel a breath of fresh air, a breeze of life...and the hope that enlivens these bones, and the people.

But notice: that hope is not of the people's making or doing.

In fact, in many ways that really is the whole point of the story, of the vision, of this word: that the people's hope wells up, not from within them, but from their God -- our God -- the God who has not forgotten them (or us), the God who will not abandon them (or us), the God who created them (and us) in the first place and can, and will, re-create them (and us) in this second (or third, or fourth, or fifth) place.

“Mortal, can these bones live?”

We ourselves may be asking this very question.

Walter Brueggemann notes,

This is always the question for Israel. Can a rescue be worked? ... Can the power for life override the reality of death? Asked in many ways, the urgent question is: Is there a future for those who are in the power of death? (Texts, 219)

“Mortal, can these bones live?”

Can our bones live? Is there a future for us?

And the answer Ezekiel gives is, “O Lord God, only you know.”

How true. How true.

But God also reveals further the deep answer to the question: Yes, these bones can live.

Your bones. My bones. The bones of our lost hope and breathless pace. The bones that are dried up and dried out by too many demands and too much uncertainty and too little assurance.

Yes, these bones can live.

And yes, they will live.

As the breeze of God’s grace blows through our hearts.

As the breath of God’s peace takes hold of our minds.

As the wind of God’s Spirit touches us and nurtures us and lifts us up to life.

Having affirmed that, notice that this passage does not offer a 5-step program to recovery. It does not provide a neat map to return to ‘life as normal’. It does not give us an outline of ‘how to’ embrace the Spirit and catch the wind and breathe in the breath.

But it does assure us that the Spirit will come and the wind will blow and our breath -- God’s breath -- will fill our lungs and our lives once again. Maybe not literally, I’m sorry to say; maybe not physically, in every case; but in the depths of our souls, yes.

For “in life and in death, we belong to God.” Always.

So, you might ask: that blowing, that breathing, that coming of the *spirit-wind-breath*,
How might it happen for us, in our lives?

Where do we see it?

How can we experience it?

Where does it touch us?

By way of addressing those questions, remember our story from the gospel of John.

Jesus’ work and his words certainly ring similar to Ezekiel’s experience with that wind-blown hope, and life.

“Prophesy to the bones, prophesy to the wind,” Ezekiel is told.

And Jesus speaks -- in the midst of his own experience of dead bones -- Jesus speaks, he himself commands...and there is life: a re-animation of the lifeless Lazarus.

But notice at the end of this story of Jesus and his work. Lazarus comes out -- that’s amazing in itself: ‘dead men’ do not ‘come out’ (no matter how much we cry out for it to happen); but Lazarus did. Lazarus comes out...and then Jesus says, “Untie him, and let him go.”

Lazarus has heard, Lazarus has responded to Jesus’ voice -- to his power, to his authority, even authority over death.

But Lazarus is still wrapped up in the burial cloths of death.

Do we know that existence, as well?

Maybe we feel like we have truly heard Jesus' call to us, his voice -- a voice reminiscent of wind blowing over ancient bones, of a breeze rattling dried out bones. We may have heard his voice. But do we know the full freedom of spirit-infused life?

What burial cloths still cling to us? What vestiges of death still weigh on us, threatening to drag us down, once again, into the tomb?

-We mentioned one last week: fear. Oh, how it clings to us. Oh, how it manipulates us to act irrationally. Oh, it's power over us to twist our thoughts and mangle our minds.

-How about resentment? Do we resent the changes we have had to make in our lives, so that we want to strike out and take out our anger and frustration on others?

-Are we so suspicious that we cannot, or will not, believe anyone or anyone's word -- and so do not trust the guidance being given as how best to combat this virus?

-Or are we so overwhelmed that we cannot go on? And we sit on our couches, or stay in bed, because "What's the use?"

Yet Jesus calls to us as well: "Lazarus, come out!" Bill, come out! Adrienne, Vanessa, Sonya, come out! Byron, Juan, David, come out!

The call is made.

The invitation is extended.

The offer is there before us.

The hope is there.

The grace is extended.

The new beginning is here before us.

Will we reach out and take hold of it?

Will we trust that the God who has been with us before through dark times and bad, will be with us even now, even in this unprecedented time?

Will we hear God's voice, addressed to us, and respond?

Will we open our hearts and our lives to the fresh wind of God's Spirit that we might open our hearts and our lives to each other?

"Prophecy to the bones," Ezekiel is told.

He prophesies -- proclaims -- to our bones as well, in words ancient, and as timely as they get.

The Lord God says,

"I will put my *spirit-wind-breath* within you, and you shall live... I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people... I will put my *spirit-wind-breath* within you, and you shall live; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act," says the Lord.

"Do you believe this?" Jesus asks Martha.

"I am the resurrection and the life. [he said] Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Do we?

This is a hope, not only for the future, but also for the present, here and now.
This is a hope we can live into and a hope we can live out of.

So let us live it. Let us act on it. Let us be it.

Let us be this hope, to affirm our faith in the God who says it is so, to bolster the faith of those who aren't sure themselves, to embody the life and love of the God who calls us from death to life, even now.

See, the wind is blowing, a breeze is breathing new life, and God's Spirit is moving in our midst.

Catch the wind.

Take in the breath.

Embrace the Spirit.

And share the life that God gives you.

***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

In life and in death we belong to God.

**Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,**

**and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,
whom alone we worship and serve.**

**With believers in every time and place,
we rejoice that nothing in life or in death
can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

(from *A Brief Statement of Faith*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions)

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Out of the depths we cry to you, O Lord.

**Lord, hear our voices
and be attentive to our prayers.**

We pray for those whose hope is lost,
who feel dried up and cut off from you.

**By your grace, open their graves;
bring them back to the land of the living.**

We pray for those who are oppressed,
held captive by the power of death.

**Release them from their chains;
unbind them and let them go!**

We pray for those who weep,
lost and lifeless in fear and regret.

**Grant them the peace of your presence;
show them what your love can do.**

We pray for medical personnel and first responders,
those on the front lines of the battle against COVID-19.

**Encourage them in your work
and protect them by your hand.**

We pray for those who are dying,
the light of life fading in their eyes.

**Help them to believe in you
so that they may live and rest in you.**

We thank you, O Lord,
for having heard our prayers.

**Enable us to trust in you,
and thus to see your glory;
through Jesus Christ,
the resurrection and the life. Amen.**

THE LORD'S PRAYER

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come,
thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and
forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but
deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,
forever. Amen.**

OFFERING

Invitation

Without the breath of God,
we are dry bones,
and without the Word of God,
we are dust.
With gratitude,
let us offer our lives
to the Lord of all life.

**Doxology* GtG 606

**Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;
praise God, all creatures here below;
praise God above, you heavenly host;
praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.**

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**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

**Holy God, giver of life,
we thank you for raising us up
and joining us together
as one people, your people,
flesh and bone in the body of Christ.**

**As you have delivered us from death,
use our lives to proclaim the good news
of new life in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** “Breathe on Me, Breath of God” GtG 286

- 1. 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.**

- 2. Breathe on me, Breath of God,
until my heart is pure,
until with thee I will one will,
to do and to endure.**

- 3. Breathe on me, Breath of God,
till I am wholly thine,
until this earthly part of me
glows with thy fire divine.**

- 4. Breathe on me, Breath of God,
so shall I never die,
but live with thee the perfect life
of thine eternity.**

***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

Arise, dry bones, and live!
Come out, Lazarus,
and give glory to God!

May the Lord Jesus Christ,
who is the resurrection and the life,
bless and keep you in this life
and the life to come.

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