

Breathe the Breath
Ezekiel 37:1-10
Sermon by Dan Schrock
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Lent 5

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

⁷So 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. ⁸I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. ⁹Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." ¹⁰I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

I

In the United States at the present time, fear of the other is perhaps more powerful than it's been in recent memory. We hear people demean others who look different, act different, or think different. National rhetoric urges us to be afraid of "radical Islamic terrorism," or to be suspicious about "enemies of the people," or to blame "illegal" immigrants. This language is designed to make us think that if we can just put the radicals, the enemies, and the illegals in their place, then the nation will be magically become a better place for the rest of us.

This kind of rhetoric is not new. For thousands of years, national leaders have used similar speech in an attempt to drum up popular support for nationalist policies. Take the phrase "enemy of the people." National leaders in ancient Rome used this phrase to demean the opposition. So did national leaders during the French Revolution in the late 1700s. In the early years of the Soviet Union, the communist leader Vladimir Lenin used this phrase "enemies of the people" as a justification for bringing charges against his political opponents. In the last one hundred years alone, people have used this phrase as a

slur against Russian czars, rebellious subjects, Jews, and imperialists.¹ In extreme cases, leaders use such language to justify getting rid of whole classes of people.

II

We who take the Bible seriously have good reasons to question such language and to refrain from using it ourselves. One reason is Ezekiel 37, the text in front of us this morning. Ezekiel's vision of breath blowing into a vast multitude of reconstituted cadavers reminds us that everyone on this planet shares a common need for breathing. Breathing is a baseline for human life. All of us breathe the same air, whether we are citizens or immigrants, Latino or Asian or black or white, female or male, gay or straight, high school graduate or college graduate, single or married, child or adult. The air around us is God's free gift, meant for all of us to use in common.

Consider what is happening right now in this room. We are all breathing together, and while some fresh air is circulating into this room from our furnaces, the rest of the air here is being passed around among us. The next breath I take may have already passed earlier this morning through _____ or _____. And the air I have inhaled and exhaled is perhaps even now entering or exiting your lungs. In a literal way, we all use the same air.

Ezekiel 37 asserts that the common air we breathe is actually a gift from God. The Hebrew word for breath is *ruach*, used seven times in the first ten verses. You can translate this word *ruach* as breath, wind, or spirit. For the Old Testament, *ruach* originates in God. It comes from God and is given as a gift to the rest of creation. In Genesis 1, for example, God's *ruach* sweeps and blows over the formless void to begin the process of creation. God's *ruach* gives life, creativity, and energy.

Other parts of the Bible build on this idea. In Genesis 2:7, God breathes the divine *ruach* into the first human being, which turns that lifeless creature of the dust into a living person. Isaiah 42:5 says that God gives this *ruach* to every person who walks on the

¹ Marc Fisher, "The Terms Trump and Bannon Use: A Glossary," *The Washington Post*, March 9, 2017, www.washingtonpost.com/politics/the-terms-trump-and-bannon-use-a-glossary/2017/03/09/, accessed March 10, 2017.

earth, a point which Paul also makes to the citizens of Athens in Acts 17:25. The gift of God's breath is so precious and foundational that Job 34:14-15 says if God decides to take back this *ruach* from us, we'd all die in an instant.

III

We can conclude, therefore, that our common humanity is rooted in breath, in the same air that comes from the same God. Through this common air that we all inhale, we are all connected to the one God. Some theologians talk about at least two kinds of deep connection which we can have with God. One type of deep connection we can have with God comes from our baptism. Not everyone chooses baptism, but for those of us who do, it can become a powerful connection to God as we live out our day-to-day discipleship.

The second type of deep connection we have with God is breathing, and this is a connection every person has with God, whether they know it or not, whether they confess it or not, and even whether they like it or not. This connection with God is so primal, so deeply embedded, that none of us can escape it while we're alive. All human beings carry within themselves the very breath of God. They can accept it or they can deny it, but they can't run away from it.

IV

This simple truth has profound and far-reaching implications. Once you realize that all of us participate moment-by-moment in the same breath of God, it becomes more difficult to demean and dismiss other people. We humans are fellow beggars, always living humbly before God, always depending on God for our very next breath, and then for the breath after that.

Breathing God's one breath puts us all on the same footing, on the same ground. None of us can claim that we are either superior or inferior to others. I receive and release God's gift of air in the same way an immigrant from Mexico does, or a queer woman does, or the president of the United States does. I am neither greater nor lesser than they, for I share the same oxygen from God. Because air is constantly swirling around the earth,

riding on the wings of the wind, some of the air I breathe could have previously passed through the lungs of an Islamic fighter, or the U.S. Senators for Indiana, one Democrat and one Republican. Next week, a coal miner in West Virginia or a senior citizen in Florida might breathe some of the air you and I are breathing at the moment. For this gift, we all depend equally on God.

It's said that an adult at rest breathes about 16 times a minute—more often during exercise. This means an adult at rest breathes about 960 breaths an hour, or 23,040 breaths a day. A person who lives to the age of 80 will take in over 672 million breaths in a lifetime.² That's a lot of God. And that's a lot of shared air with others around the world.

So go ahead, breathe the breath of God. And while you do that, consider how you might want to treat fellow human beings who rely just as much on God's breath as you do. Consider how you might honor them, respect them, and be patient with them.

² Walker Meade, "Every Breath You Take," *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, January 12, 2010, <http://www.heraldtribune.com/news/20100112/every-breath-you-take>, accessed March 10, 2017.