

## **BREATHLESS**

In December of 2008 – just over five short months ago – my father, a medical doctor, was able to provide clinic coverage for a week in his community of Invermere. At Christmas time we visited for a day with my parents in White Rock at my oldest brother's home. You may recall that it snowed that day. My dad insisted on helping to shovel the snow. Nearing the end of his 78<sup>th</sup> year he remained vibrant, capable, relatively healthy and full of life.

However, early in January my dad seemed to run out of steam – to run out of air – he became breathless. He needed extra oxygen – not for mountain climbing or other strenuous and optional pursuits – he needed extra oxygen just to survive. How quickly things can change! Suddenly my father was frail – compromised in an unexpected way – vulnerable and seemingly defeated. The early months of this year were worrying for my siblings, for my mother and for me. My father needed all his energy just to get up each day. He became discouraged and depressed. There were times when we lost hope.

As the days and weeks passed, the breathlessness decreased – perhaps some of the medications were taking effect – perhaps it was just the passage of time and the encouragement of prayer. These days my mom and dad are more hopeful about their future – filled with the buoyancy of air-inflated lungs I guess. The experience of all of this has led me to hear the text from Ezekiel in a particular way today. I see the dry bones differently – I experience the breath in new ways – I understand what it means to be “cut off” from a fresh perspective.

At the end of the passage we are told that the bones are the whole house of Israel – the entire community of faith is withering away just as my father seemed to be withering away. And those people, like my family, were despairing: “we are finished; our bodies are used up; our hope is gone; we are not connected to one another or to God anymore; we have run out of steam – we are breathless.”

How much like the house of Israel in ancient times and like my family a few months ago is the church in this day and age? How much can we as individuals and our congregation as a community fall into that same state of body and mind? Is the church out of breath? Are we out of breath? Is our community of faith out of breath?

Certainly there is low morale in churches as declining numbers, financial shortfalls, claims of various kinds of power abuse, and a growing sense of captivity to the dominant culture are experienced by so many. As we see an aging membership, rapid change in much of what was once familiar and timeless, and disdain of our beliefs in the world we can become afraid of what we stand to lose. We circle the proverbial wagons and hunker down to preserve what we have left. It becomes easy to ask “Can these bones live? Can our congregations survive? Will our denomination fracture? Will we meet the budget this year? Who will be left to carry on?”

When we feel frail and brittle and vulnerable we can wonder if God is here among us at all. We can feel like the dry bones in the valley that rattle in frightening ways when we come together. We can lose hope. Therefore this passage from Ezekiel is surely for us today.

It may well be the first instance of the metaphor of resurrection in history. Ezekiel uses it not to depict an afterlife or a general resurrection of the dead, but as a metaphor for the renewal of the people of Israel. Captivity has sapped their hope. They regard their political and military defeat as an irrevocable historical judgment. It seems as though Yahweh has been

proven impotent. The Babylonians have prevailed. Why not assimilate? There is no end in sight for the empire, no conceivable vindication of Yahweh, no grounds for hope. In their despair, the people lament and God responds with a new wind of optimism – anticipating a secure and vibrant future.

Yahweh orders Ezekiel to prophesy to the dry bones – to the spiritually desiccated Israel – and to call them back to life. And though this miracle is one that only God can perform, it is the prophet who must, at each step of the way, speak to the dry bones. It is the prophetic task, in a time of unraveling hopes, to declare the unimaginable – to assert the rationality of the unthinkable – to call the people to new hope, grounded not on the past but on sheer faith that God is about to do the impossible.

That is how history is made: by envisioning new alternatives and acting on them as if they were inevitable. That is how despair is overcome: by the declaration of unlikelihoods welling up from the center of reality – by prophesying a course of action God is conspiring to bring to pass.

Israel did go home. The temple was rebuilt. Babylon, that eternal empire, fell within 50 years. And more: God's promise to put divine spirit in them – though not immediately fulfilled – was reiterated by Joel in an even more unbelievable vision remembered in our reading from Acts today: *"I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit."*

At Pentecost the Holy Spirit fell upon the gathered followers of Jesus with "tongues of fire", and the church was launched into its mission of bringing the good news of liberation and salvation through Jesus to the world. A group of people who had lost their moorings – who were uncertain of the way forward – breathless people lacking in all models and patterns and sure of only one thing – the good news of Jesus Christ – received the breath of God among and within themselves. Once again God was doing the impossible. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit was power and promise for their journey into the unknown.

And God is at work in our malaise today. It may be that the congregation-based church will continue to wither away even as people experience unprecedented levels of spiritual hunger and restlessness. It may be that the denominational way of doing things will continue to decline. It may be that the new forms of the church's faithfulness are already present among us, unrecognized. It may be that they are still waiting to be birthed. This will continue to be one of the most turbulent and innovative periods in the church's history. The very depression that wracks so many may be the pry bar that will separate us from dying forms.

*"I am going to open your graves... I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act."*

These same words apply to us and to our communities of faith today. It's a promise we can count on, believe in, and act on. Our dry bones do live – they live to praise God, to serve others, and to walk in faith and light. Christ's church will go on regardless of our often bungling, well-meaning, and pitifully human attempts to be good stewards of all that we've been so graciously given. God is already bringing these dry bones to life. Despite our breathlessness, God inspires creative life in us, fleshes out our hopes and dreams for ministry and mission, and calls us to walk in faith. Thanks be to God who has spoken and who continues to act. **Amen.**