



December 10, 2017

## **GOD HELPS US CATCH OUR BREATH**

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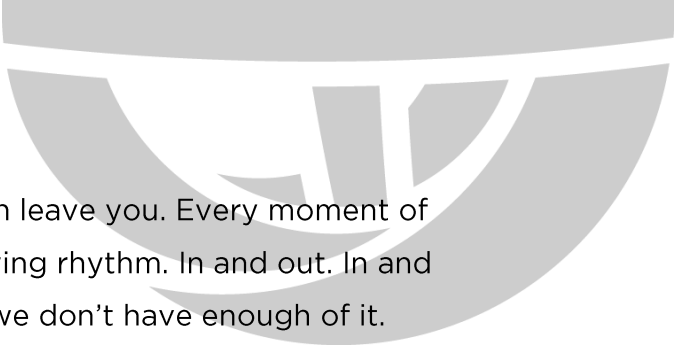
### **EZEKIEL 37:1-14 NRSV**

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. <sup>2</sup>He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. <sup>3</sup>He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." <sup>4</sup>Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. <sup>5</sup>Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. <sup>6</sup>I 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."

<sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>I 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. <sup>9</sup>Then he said to me, "Prophecy 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." <sup>10</sup>I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

<sup>11</sup>Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' <sup>12</sup>Therefore prophesy, 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. <sup>13</sup>And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. <sup>14</sup>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, says the LORD."

Breath. Every moment of every day of our lives our bodies provide this gift to us. In and out. Go ahead, take a deep breath now. Feel your body expand bringing life-giving oxygen to your blood and energy to every cell in your being.

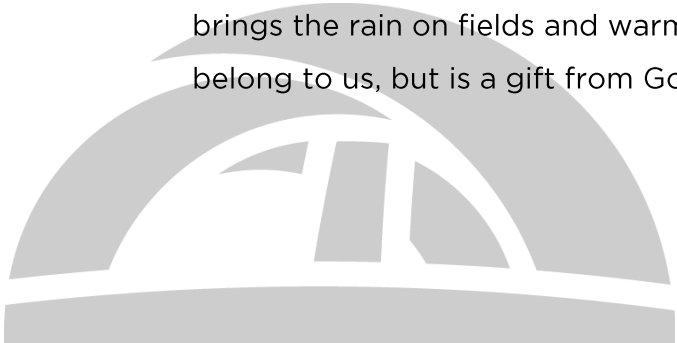


And breathe out. Feel your body relax as your breath leave you. Every moment of every day of our lives our bodies provide this life-giving rhythm. In and out. In and out. Breath. Life. Yet, we hardly notice it at all, until we don't have enough of it.

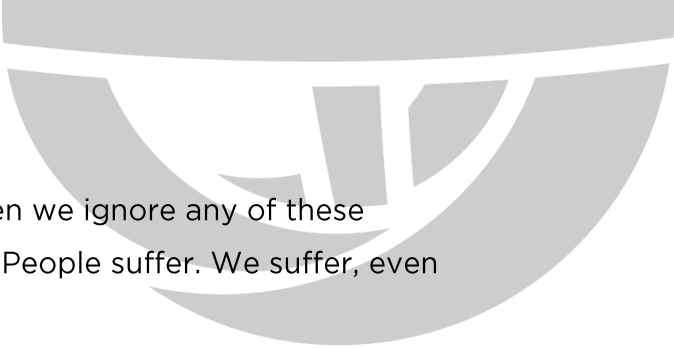
Without breath we are without life. If you have ever had pneumonia or extreme stress or anxiety or suffered a heart attack, you may know all too well of trying to live without enough breath. Thankfully, there are medical interventions that help us breathe when we are not able. But that doesn't always address the underlying condition. It's not just physical conditions that can leave us breathless. There are plenty of events that happen in our lives where we are left feeling literally or figuratively without air.

A loved one who struggles with addiction is not just suffocating him or herself, but everyone around them too. The work mantra of "do less with more" is pushing so many other life-giving elements of the week to the margins, and the margins are quickly evaporating.

And there are plenty of things that are happening in our world that make me want to cry out, "I can't breathe." Not because I feel oppressed or imposed upon. As a white, straight, economically-secure man, my kind are doing just fine. But I can't help but notice that so many others aren't; and that there is little to no will to actually do things that will make it easier for immigrants, people of color, LGBT people, women, children, and seniors to breathe easier. Just about every corner of the world seems to be curved in on itself, retreating to various forms of tribalism and self-preservation. It feels like the connective tissues that hold the whole human community together is suffering atrophy and drying up.



In the Old Testament the word, *ruach*, is used for breath, wind, and spirit. There is no distinction. The breath that flows in and out of us is the same as the Spirit of God that moves in and through all of creation and the same as the wind that brings the rain on fields and warm temperatures in the summer. Ruach does not belong to us, but is a gift from God. It is the connective tissue that holds all things,




individually and collectively, together with God. When we ignore any of these connections there are consequences. Things dry up. People suffer. We suffer, even if “we” are not the ones directly affected.

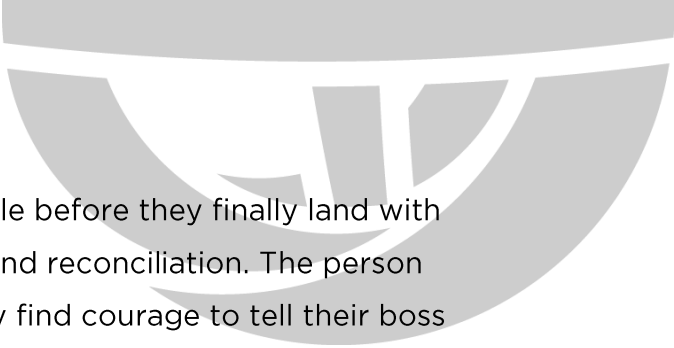
Ezekiel was a priest and prophet who was called to breathe life back into God’s people at a time when they were deeply disconnected. They were living in exile in Babylon. But they were coming apart long before the exile. Israel and Judah had rebelled against God for generations. They ignored the ways God had for them. They fought amongst themselves, became arrogant and careless about how they treated one another. Their carelessness left them dried up, scattered like bones across an empty valley. They didn’t realize what they had become. The exile from Jerusalem was a tangible reminder of how dry and breathless God’s people really were.

In a vision, Ezekiel prophesied to the bones and they came together, but they did not live until they had God’s breath. Eleven times in 14 chapters, God names the *ruach* – the breath, the spirit, the wind that comes from God and gives life to all living things. God said to Ezekiel, “These bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, “Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.”

Old Testament professor Rolf Jacobson calls these words lament. It’s a complaint that they are not as they ought to be. But I also hear a confession in these words as well. A confession that admits that they have hit rock bottom and the only way forward is to allow God to breathe life back into them, and to seek a new way forward.

As difficult as exile is, maybe that is one of God’s purposes for it – to provide space to see how our actions and the actions of others steal life away in many forms. God meets us in these places. God doesn’t wait for us to figure it all out and come tromping home. Rather, God helps us catch our breath while still in exile so that we can find a new way home.





The addict destroying his or her life may need an exile before they finally land with a thud at rock-bottom and reach out for treatment and reconciliation. The person who feels lost and heavy burdened in their work may find courage to tell their boss what is breaking their spirit so that they can find life in their work again. The couple who has isolated themselves from one another for years might name the exile they find themselves in and determine what had died in their relationship and honestly seek ways for them to live and breathe again together.

As a nation, it feels like we are living in exile because we have forgotten who we are and to whom we belong. The intense divisions of political ideology have knocked the wind out of us. The quest for power and control by any means necessary, in every political party, is sucking the life out the liberty and justice that is claimed for all.

There are times in life when things need to dry up and die. There are times when we leave behind old patterns and habits and relationships so that we can live a fuller life in the future. But the only way we can see a new future is to trust that God is there waiting to breathe new life into us.

Friends, in this season of Advent we hold our breath, waiting, longing to breathe in the fresh breath, the *ruach*, of God's promise to make a home among us. God does not leave us in exile. The God who breathed life into Adam and Eve in the Garden, and breathed new life into bones in the valley, meets us in the disconnected dry places in our lives with a promise. "I shall cause breath to enter you and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord." Amen.

