

John Docherty, April 2, 2017
And the breath of God came into them

Ezekiel is probably not one of the more familiar prophets, and the image raised by the passage that was read earlier is perhaps the only part of his book that rings any bells with most of us.

It's a striking image, with thousands of dry bones clattering about, reconnecting themselves, developing sinew, muscle and skin, then coming to life when the breath is returned to their lungs. It's not what I'd call a morbid image, but it's certainly a bit on the gruesome side. Something of a zombie apocalypse among the ancient Hebrews.

But, of course, it's not intended as a literal description of a literal event. It's a promise within a metaphor within a vision.

The vision is a dream of things to come.

The metaphor is life being breathed back into the lifeless carcass of the nation of Israel.

The promise is the restoration of the nation to the land of Israel following their exile to Babylon.

And the promise is tied up with the Spirit of God, as God moves among the people, bringing new life and a new appreciation of God's faithfulness.

In the context of the Ezekiel passage, the promise is a general one for the nation : God says "... I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord ..."

The Romans passage that was read is not a parallel, but it does mirror the central theme of the Ezekiel passage, though it's on a more personal level. In Romans, Paul says "... If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you ..."

In both passages, the imagery is tied up with the action of the Spirit of God. The Ezekiel passage is particularly rich in this imagery – not so much directly because of the business of the dry bones being brought back to life, as astonishing as that is,

but in the way in which Ezekiel plays with the mechanism of the bringing back to life. He uses the Hebrew word for Spirit – ruach – in three ways.

It's an interesting word, this *ruach*. It's variously used to refer to wind, to breath, and to spirit. We don't really have a direct equivalent in English, but I don't think any of us have any trouble seeing why it could carry those different meanings. Wind and breath, at least, are basically the same thing : moving air.

Spirit, in English, though, is a little more removed from the idea of wind and breath, though it's taken from a Latin word that carries that sense. We tend to imbue the word *spirit* with another level of meaning, though we also can use it in various ways.

We can speak of our spirit as that part of us that is not physical, but rather “*spiritual*” - on another dimension from the purely biological.

We can speak of the “spirit of the times”, the “zeitgeist”; or the spirit embodied in an event, meaning the ambiance you can feel somewhere.

We can use it as a verb : to *spirit* someone away.

In the plural, *spirits*, we mean a form of alcoholic drink, or something like *mineral spirits*.

We also, of course, refer to the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity.

One dictionary I consulted has no less than ten distinct uses for the word *spirit*.

We don't often use it as a version of the word *breath*, but we **do** have a related word that means *to breathe* : ***inspire***. **This** word also has it's roots in Latin, and you'll recognize it from the French word that means “to breathe” : ***inspirer***.

Inspiration.

Now ***that's*** an interesting word.

It hints at things that are a bit on the intangible side of thought; things that are drawn out of the air. Strictly speaking, when we say we're looking for inspiration, we're saying we're looking for something from outside of ourselves to be breathed into us.

When I'm preparing a meditation, for example, I do my reading; I reflect on the Scriptures; I study the commentaries. But before I sit down to write up my notes, I take time to wait for a clear sense of how to approach things; a sense of what the central message needs to be.

I look for inspiration. And I try very hard to ensure that I'm faithful to what I believe the Scriptures are saying. I don't claim my meditations are "inspired" – either in the sense of being spectacular, or in the sense of being a reflection of something Godly, outside of myself – but I *do* look for inspiration.

And I think that is important, because we believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God.

The very first line of the article of our Mennonite Confession of Faith that deals with Scripture says this :

“We believe that all Scripture is inspired by God through the Holy Spirit for instruction in salvation and training in righteousness.”

The commentary on that section elaborates a little and says : “The authority of Scripture has its ultimate source in God, who has inspired (“breathed”) it for specific purposes in the life of the church and its members ... Precisely how God has inspired the Scriptures through the Holy Spirit is not explained in the Bible. We therefore content ourselves with the assurance that Scripture is fully reliable and trustworthy because the One who has inspired it is faithful and true.”

The final sentences of that article say :

“We participate in the church's task of interpreting the Bible and of discerning what God is saying in our time by examining all things in the light of Scripture. Insights and understandings which we bring to the interpretation of the Scripture are to be tested in the faith community.”

And I think that last sentence is key : we are to test our interpretation in the community of faith.

This is why I think our sharing time is so important, and why it is healthy to place it after the meditation.

We are here to struggle together to understand what this Book has to say to us about faithfulness.

We are here to discern together what it means to be followers of Christ.

We are here to pray and worship together as we seek to live out the Spirit of Christ that has been placed in us.

I know that my understanding of how to read Scripture is not as conservative as some in our circle would prefer. I accept that this Book is a collection of writings that the community of faith over the centuries has accepted as profitable for living a faithful life.

But I am no longer willing to accept that God stopped speaking to us, and stopped inspiring thought two thousand years ago.

This Book is a collection of *dry bones* : it is inert, lifeless, black ink on paper – and it will remain a collection of dry bones unless we *read* those lines, allowing God to breathe life into them; *drawing* from them the inspiration we need to fashion our own lives.

And that reading will be informed by the issues of our day. Our faithfulness will be tailored to respond to the pain and injustices of our time.

And I'm quite willing to accept that our collective discernment of what constitutes faithfulness may not coincide entirely with what Ezra argued three thousand years ago, or what Paul argued two thousand years ago, or what Thomas Aquinas argued eight hundred years ago, or what Martin Luther argued five hundred years ago, or what I argued a year ago.

Faith is a living thing.

It needs breath, like any living thing.

A few years ago our oldest grandson and I were wrestling in the living room. He was about five years old at the time, and at one point, he started strangling me.

Well, even at the age of five, he was already pretty strong, and I stopped him.

I cautioned him that if he was playing with his friends and did that he could seriously harm them. I suggested that choking was very dangerous, and I asked him if he knew what we needed to be able to live.

He thought for a bit then said, “you're right Poppa. We need to be able to breathe, to eat, and to poop.”

I hadn't taken my own thinking quite that far, but somehow he managed to identify precisely what any living organism needs to survive : the ability to take in nourishment, and the ability to eliminate the toxins produced from the oxidization of that nourishment.

I'd like to suggest that our faith is like any other living organism.

We need the breath of inspiration; the food of Scripture; and the ability to eliminate from our lives whatever is toxic.

Or, if I were to return to the image in Ezekiel's vision, we need the bones of Scripture, the sinews of communal discernment, the muscle of conviction, and the breath of God.