

BREATH
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April 6, 2014
Fifth Sunday in Lent
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Breathe in (God is love)
Breathe out (I am love)
[repeat]

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Then the Voice 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.' Therefore speak out and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you back to the land."

John 11:1-45

Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out of the grave, his hands and feet and face bound with strips of cloth. Jesus said, "Unbind him, and let him go."

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For the past two months, I've been meeting with seven youth in a confirmation class. One month from today these 9th and 10th graders will declare their intentions to stand or not to stand in the faith tradition into which their parents had them baptized.

At that time they had no say in it. Now they do. They are young adults. Good luck making them do something they don't want to do.

If truth be told, none of them—not one—is breathlessly eager to be a Presbyterian or even a Christian. In fact, they are squeamish about being religious—or thought to be so. But every one of them would like to have a good life.

Of course, there are many ways to define the good life and Presbyterianism has something to say about that, but it must be said to them sideways—if you know what I mean.

For the moment, most of them think the good life consists of sports, college, entertainment, cool stuff, their own car and unlimited gigabytes. For the life of them they can't figure out how church could possibly improve their lives or advance their careers one iota.

So I'm teaching them to breathe.

As the so-called Jewish Buddha put it: *Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out. Forget this and attaining Enlightenment will be the least of your problems.*

Of course, I really don't have to teach breathing. Breathing is natural and easy. Noticing breath isn't. And that's where teaching comes in. For breath is where are faith tradition begins.

I'm teaching these confirmands to notice their breath. After all, breath is mysterious and nearly magical.

If you don't believe it, just be there when something or someone takes its last breath. One second a body is alive; the next not.

What is it about breath? Where does it come from? Where does it go?

Our Hebrew great ancestors noticed breath. And wondered about it. And put their wonder into a mythic tale. That mythic poem appears in what we call Genesis, chapter one.

Once upon a time, before time and life began the *breath* of God hovered over dark, formless chaos. Or we might say, the *wind* of God hovered, or the *spirit* of God hovered because the Hebrew word RUAH can mean spirit, wind or breath. One word; three meanings.

Our own word *expire*, like the word *inspire*, comes from spirit. When one expires, the spirit or breath is gone.

The spirit, like the wind, comes and goes, but who can say where it comes from or where it goes. The spirit, like breath, comes and goes, but who can say where it comes from or where it goes.

And that's a way of saying there is more to this world than what we can see or measure. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts. It's a holy mystery with many names. Breath is the substance of that mystery, even though breath has no substance to speak of.

I'm teaching our youth to notice breath.

Our great ancestors noticed breath and considered it divine as yet another folk tale in Genesis 2 suggests. Out of the dust of the earth, the Lord God, like a potter, fashioned a human like creature. But it was just a shell of something, you know, the way you sometimes feel. A shell of something. There, but empty. Then, the Lord breathed into the nostrils of the creature and it became alive. It got soul. It got mojo.

Or, as we might tell that same story today like this: out of stardust the process of biological evolution fashioned a humanoid creature out of the animal world. And then something happened. That creature was infused with a higher consciousness, including power to create and destroy like no other species on earth.

What destiny would it choose?

The so-called good life, you see, might not be so good after all. It all depends. Choices make a difference. And we are easily deceived. Existence is one thing; being alive is something else.

And that brings us to the lessons for today.

Once upon a time, 600 years before the birth of Jesus, Ezekiel had a vision for his devastated people, devastated the way America has been devastated in more ways than one, in more times than one. Ezekiel's people were devastated, depleted and diminished the way you sometimes feel. Done in. Flattened. Dried out.

Ezekiel had a vision. He saw a valley full of dry bones.

Will these bones ever live, asked the Voice.

Only you know, said Ezekiel.

And the Voice said: *Call out to the bones*.

Ezekiel called out. And just like that, bones shook and rattled and scurried across the valley floor. Foot bones got connected to leg bones; leg bones got connected to hip bones and hip bones to back bones. And soon the valley was full of human shapes, bones covered by muscle and flesh.

And the Voice said: *what do you see?*

I see bodies but no life.

And the Voice said: *call out to the Breath.*

And Ezekiel called out. *Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.*

There came a rush of wind. And suddenly a vast multitude of humans stood upon their feet, fully alive.

And the Voice said: *I will open your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back home. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.*

Years later, a prophet, like Ezekiel, named Jesus stood before the grave of his dear friend Lazarus. The grave was a cave with a stone rolled over its mouth. And according to the gospel story, as Jesus stood there, he wept. Slow tears fell. And then he took a deep breath and said: *Lazarus, come forth.*

Lazarus came out, his hands and feet and face bound with strips of cloth. And Jesus said, *unbind him, and let him go.*

I'm teaching our youth to notice their breath. Breathe in. *God is love.* Breathe out. *I am love.* It's a daily practice. And over time we start to notice things we might not have seen.

There is something in this world greater than the sum of its parts. We might say it's Breath. But it's more than that. And all I can say is: it awaits your attention and your voice.