

Sermon Preached by Deb Lind-Schmitz on April 6, 2014
The Presbyterian Church, Geneva, New York

Ezekiel 37:1-5 *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." Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.*

Romans 8:1-5, 11 *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit...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.*

Breathing in New Life!

One of my favorite TV shows is "Bones", a forensic science mystery is graphic and not a dinner time show, at least not the first 20 minutes. The plot is usually the same; a dead body is discovered. Usually it is unidentifiable and the scientists of the Jeffersonian examine bones, muscle, and other tissues to determine the circumstances around the person's death. The person was more than his/her remains. In each case, there is the satisfaction in knowing more about the deceased. Dr. Temperance Brennan, "Bones" can read those bones better than anyone. With the technology, available today, visual facial reconstruction is accomplished using a computer beginning with bones, skull and some intuition. Within the hour a personality, the victim's story emerges and he or she comes to life, so to speak.

Last week, I watched a Discovery Documentary, "Who is Jesus?" which explore the historical context of Jesus. Using archeological and Biblical information, they unearth insights and revelations. One of the most fascinating finds was a facial reconstruction of a typical Galilean boy. Around twelve years of age, Jesus talked with the Jewish elders in the temple. I found it fascinating to watch the muscles and facial features emerge on the skull to produce a picture of a boy. His hair was dark brown or black. Because Nazareth was poor, his hair would be shorter. There was much evidence of malnutrition in the first century AD. Fifty percent of children did not reach the age of five. Malaria and infectious disease was plentiful. Family took care of each other. Compassion was essential to survival. A young Galilean boy who survives might have an extended family that has similar genes as neighbors.



The picture of this young boy emerged with his skin olive and deep-set eyes. His nose was longer and straight. The face was not like the blond blue-eyed paintings we saw as children. The teenage male who once lived and breathed in first century Nazareth could have been a playmate and most probably a relative of Jesus. Regardless of what Jesus looked like, it is his actions and words that we remember and seek to emulate.

The Sunday before Holy Week our focus is on the promise of resurrection. Resurrection does not promise new life as in the birth of a baby. Rather resurrection is the divine act of infusing life into that which was dead, literally as in the raising of Lazarus and metaphorically, as in the Book of Ezekiel's Dry Bones. Those living in deep despair, churches experiencing spiritual drought receive hope of new life in this passage. Let us investigate the historical context around our prophetic Hebrew scripture. Walk into this desert. The prophet Ezekiel was called by God to speak to the exiled Israelites in 592 BC. They broke their covenant with the God of their fathers and mothers. In their

displacement from their homeland, they were also isolated from their God. Jerusalem lay in ruin. Their religion and faith was metaphorically in shambles and Ezekiel brings this message the despairing community. Anyone who is willing listen, to show up, to hear the message must first understand the spiritual condition. The desert, the driest image is the perfect metaphor for despair or hopelessness.

God sends the prophet, Ezekiel to investigate skeletons in a desert valley, possibly a battlefield with piles of bones drying in the sun. Images of Arizona, Death Valley, mass graves flash in our minds.

Then God asks, "Mortal, can these bones live?" Most of us would quickly answer, "No"

Ezekiel understands who he is talking to and answers, "Oh Lord, only you can know." Good answer. Yet, God does not immediately take action and revive the bones. Rather, **God tells Ezekiel to prophesy. Tell** the dry bones to "Hear the Word of the Lord. The condition is to hear the hopeful promise of God, You who feel dead, will be revived. Then, It happens, the bones are reconnected, sinew is added. But, there is still no life in them. God then commands Ezekiel to breathe life into the bodies.

"I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will put muscle back on your body, I will give you the strength to get up and move again."

The Hebrew word, "Ruah" that sounds like breath also means "spirit". And, Ezekiel commands the four winds, "O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." And the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude." Then God "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel." This is the congregation, this is the People of God. They need God's Spirit infused into each and every one of them.

Some of you may remember the spiritual song based on this prophesy, it was an anatomical lesson as well as scriptural.

The toe bone connected to the foot bone

Foot bone connected to the heel bone

Heel bone connected to the ankle bone

Ankle bone connected to the shin bone

Now hear the word of the Lord.

Dem Bones gonna walk around, Dem Bones gonna walk around,

Dem Bones gonna walk around, Dem Bones gonna walk around

For anyone sick or down, this song alone could raise their spirit and at least get their toe tapping. Some people think that God has left the church. God has not left the Church, God dwells within believers, so if you have God within, if you have the Spirit dwelling within you, God is here, there and everywhere.

The Romans scripture talks about the "In-Dwelling of the Spirit", "Christ within", the "Spirit of the One who raised Jesus from the dead is in you." The relationship between human and the divine is not shallow or distant; it is intimate and mysterious and life- giving.

Our Hope is revealed in every breath we take, every life giving breath is God's spirit.

Our Guidance is lodged in the words and actions of Christ. The Christ within guides our actions and reactions.

Last week at Leona Choffin's funeral service several people remembered her acts of hospitality, baking cookies at Christmas, taking care of people and her welcoming smile. What we value in others in life and at death is often the teachings of Christ. The Spirit of God within give us life as we reach out with hospitality, mercy, grace and love. What is it about Christ that you want to emulate? Let that Spirit of God dwell in you! And, Breathe, just Breathe in New Life.