

Ezekiel 37:1-14.

37The 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.” 4Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. 5Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 6I 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.” 7So 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. 8I 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. 9Then 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.” 10I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. 11Then 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.’ 12Therefore 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. 13And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 14I 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.

Historical Context

Ezekiel, it is assumed, went into a Babylonian exile with the first wave of deportees in 597 B.C.E., a group that was added to when Nebuchadnezzar ten years later destroyed what remained of Jerusalem in a furious rage, capturing and blinding the king, Zedekiah, and herding the last leaders of a shattered Judah eastward to the huge Babylonian capital. So, when Ezekiel speaks of dry bones in a valley, he means precisely that —empty lives after a crashing defeat.

Theme: Life-Giving Breath

In Ezekiel, dry bones are knit back together and infused with life-giving breath. Resurrection is not new life, but renewed life, life forged from death; even the risen Jesus still bore his scars. With all its brutal honesty, Ezekiel’s vision challenges us to see that the problem is not death but the fear of it, while the solution -- God’s ever-present gift of life -- is as near to us as breathing.

If the dry bones represent the living exiles, then, it turns out that the entire vision is concerned, not with the reality of death, but with despair. The exiles were the survivors, yet they have dug their graves with their fear of God’s absence. To this hopelessness Ezekiel offers a startlingly simple metaphor of divine presence, the ready availability of breath. In just fourteen verses, the word *ruach* occurs nine times. Whether translated as “breath,” “wind,” or God’s own spirit, it is all the same life-giving force. And it is all from God.

It is in this sense that breathing becomes a metaphor for divine presence. Despite the exiles' fear of being cut off from God, God is as near to them as their own breath. Ezekiel's vision does nothing to alleviate them of their present difficult circumstances, though it does promise them a future in their own land. Though they remain in exile, still coping with the death of loved ones, still mourning the loss of familiar ways to find and meet God, they are reassured of God's presence. The standing multitude of dry bones brought back to life now acquires a somewhat different connotation. Because God is present, they can breathe. And stand ready for the future, looking forward in hope.