Devotional on Ezekiel 37:1-14 Lent 5
(During the Suspension of In-Person Services due to Covid-19)

In my vocational life I've quite often had the privilege of being in a room, usually a hospital room, a hospice room, sometimes in a care home, sometimes in a house, with a body of someone recently deceased.

I'm there with the deceased's loved ones as we cry, express relief for suffering ended and pray.

Inevitably I see the chest of the dead person still moving, the body breathing. This because our brains can't see a body any other way, the imperceptible movements of breath animating a body are just the way our eyes and brains perceive other human beings.

It's at times like this that I'm made aware again of the centrality of breath; something that we don't think about most of the time, something that simply "happens," that operates, for the most part beyond choice and yet without which there cannot be life.

But now we're all thinking about breath and breathing, aren't we? We know that the virus called Covid-19 attacks the respiratory systems of human beings and that those of us who have some weakness in our lungs whether from a condition like asthma or emphysema or simply because at one point we've had severe bronchitis or pneumonia or simply because our lungs have been damaged by prolonged exposure to toxins or pollutants e.g. smoking or smog. That's quite a lot of us actually, are in danger from this virus.

We know that there are not enough ventilators, oxygen machines to go around if the pandemic surges.

We've also been made more aware in this time of global climate change that our world itself is suffering from constricted lungs; that our oceans are acidifying as carbon fills our atmosphere. At no time in human existence has our atmosphere been as threatened as it is right now.

Breath, breathing, the mostly unconscious process that sustains life, is now at the forefront of our conscious thoughts.

Some say that such a view is merely subjective, that if I were to look at things from a more positive perspective I would see signs of hope. Yes, there are signs of hope, but they don't magically appear by simply "whistling in the dark" or "putting a smile on." A changed mood doesn't change the reality we're in, that by and large humans have created!

Here's where the readings today can be so helpful. For the purposes of this devotional I'm focusing on our first reading from the prophet of Ezekiel but the message is there in our psalm, our second reading and certainly in the story from John's Gospel.

Ezekiel the prophet, as God's spokesperson, has a mission to bring hope to God's people but to get there he can't just tell them to put on a happy face or pretend that the darkness they are in isn't real. In other words he can't further their denial of reality.

The people of Judah have been scattered by their enemies, most have been brought captive to Babylon, a few stragglers remain in a desolate and broken down Jerusalem. The body politic is dead, a valley of dry bones.

When Israelites would roll away the stone from in front of the family tomb because someone in the family died, they would see again, the remains of people who died earlier. There was grandpa and Grandma, or what was left of them: dry bones!

It is this common reality now projected onto the nation! If we're going to come to renewed life we need to reckon first of all with reality, with the reality of feelings of hope that have died (our subjective experiences) but also the changed realities that are objective (the state of our world, the state of the people of God, the Church, our own lack of relationship with God).

It's when our minds take in what we normally don't want to see, that chest is no longer heaving, those bones are real and they're dry! That we begin to pray as our Psalmist does "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord…O Israel, hope in the Lord!

So, not just, "where do you feel dead as dry bones in your life?" but "where in your life are you actually dead?" Possibly because of some habit or sin that you feel is not ever going to let you go; possibly in some economic or vocational

reality; the reality of your age which maybe leaves you with regrets for paths not taken. I'm betting all of us have dry, dead bones in us.

But the Good News of Lent is that when we're feeling dead or when we reckon with the parts of us that are actually dead, even when it seems God is finished with us, God isn't finished, we're not finished.

Now, to be clear, I'm not now going to sneak false hope in through the backdoor as it were; it's not as if nostalgia wins and things can go back to what they were before we made certain choices, before certain things happened in the Church.

Certainly the world can't naively or simply wish that we hadn't made the fateful choices we've made around how we've systematically exploited the environment.

But there really is good news from a biblical perspective because of a fundamental intertwining of human and divine life! The Hebrew word *ruah* which is used consistently in this text means wind, breath, and Spirit, both human spirit and Divine. And where one meaning leaves off and the next takes up is blurred, purposefully and, I would add, gloriously!

By spirit the Bible means the dynamic life power inherent in a person that finds expression in dynamic and creative action. And of course God is the ultimate in dynamic life power.

Earlier in John, Jesus had told Nicodemus that he needed to be "born of the Spirit," by which he suggests that new understanding, transformation comes to us when our life finds itself reborn by connecting with God's Life.

It's in times like pandemics that we begin to reckon with what is actually always true, without God's Life, the human spirit will end up as dry bones, scattered, depleted of life power and creativity, depleted of hope.

It's at times like this that we face the fact that human brilliance, on it's own, though capable of producing the industrial revolution, cannot see that that choice will lead to the earth itself starving for breath. Our spirit has great creative power but not the infinite foresight required

But when, like Ezekiel, we dare to subjectively and objectively hope in God's life power then we can prophesy to ourselves, to the church and to the nation: God is not finished with us yet. We will be enabled to "come together," for bone to be

connected to bone, for muscle and sinew to be made strong and then, miraculously, for breath to heave our chest once again.

I don't know if it was a respiratory illness that felled Lazarus but when Jesus "prophesied to his body" he was essentially doing what Ezekiel was doing metaphorically and what, each of us can yet do for one another.

We are not just a product of our past, of our cultural and historical moment! The story from Ezekiel, the promise of the Spirit is that life can yet come to our mortal body politic, to our way of life and that our words, cooperating with God's words, our spirit with God's Spirit can be part of what brings the bones back to life!