**Catch His Breath**

**6-7-20**

Israel was dead. Judah was dead. The people of God were no more.

* Their land was gone, their temple destroyed, their government dissolved, and their national identity in tatters.
  + Ezekiel was a prophet to what was left of the people of God, and God gives him this vision of the nation.
    - They are so dead as to be represented by a valley full of bones.
    - Dead so long and so completely that the bones were described as very dry – no life left in them at all.
* And God gives Ezekiel was must have seemed to be a pointless task – he was to prophesy to these dead, dry bones.
  + Preach to them, proclaim the words of God to them, call them to change and to action.
  + But really, what’s the point?
    - Can dry bones respond?
      * Isn’t it hopeless to seek to draw blood from a turnip?
        + That’s an old expression –
      * But it makes as much sense as trying to get a response from a pile of old bones.
* But the Word of God did have effect.
  + It roused the bones and reconnected them.
  + It grew muscles and grafted new skin.
  + The Word of God miraculously put meat on those bones and gave them bodies once again.
    - Amazing, unbelievable, incomprehensible…
    - Yet still pointless.
  + For so far, all that has been accomplished in the prophesying – in the preaching of the Word of God – is to rebuild good looking dead bodies.
    - Enough of God to look good – to look alive.
    - But its all just appearances – just surface level evidence of life, where no life truly exists.

In so many ways, this is where I feel like our nation and our world exists most of the time.

* We look pretty good and put on a good face.
  + We have enough of God to know, for the most part, what he considers right and wrong in the big picture.
  + So, on the surface we create systems and practices that have the appearance of life.
    - Only to discover during weeks like this last one that its all an illusion.
      * That, yes, we elected a black man as president, but it didn’t change the system.
      * And yes, before COVID-19 black unemployment had reached record lows, but it didn’t change attitudes.
    - For nearly 50 years we have managed to put muscle, flesh and skin on the racial divide in our nation.
      * But then something like the murder of George Floyd happens and it reveals that all of this – good as it is – is just window dressing.
      * The underlying attitudes, the hidden and systematized prejudices, the cultural blind spots, the inability to hear one another all continue on.
        + Not so dead as 50 years ago…
        + But still not alive.
* It struck me last week as I watched the successful launch of the manned Space X rocket during the rioting across the country, how little things had really changed.
  + When I was almost 10 years old, I sat with my family, glued to our television, watching grainy black and white images of another rocket launch – Apollo 11.
    - Apollo 11 was the first manned mission to the moon – and for several days in July of 1969 we watched as the Astronauts made their way to the moon.
      * And then set foot on the moon – “one small step for man; one giant leap for mankind.”
  + But juxtaposed with that great accomplishment was the reality of race riots and anti-war demonstrations.
    - It had been just over a year since Martin Luther King Junior and Senator Robert Kennedy had been gunned down in Memphis and LA.
    - And during the very same week as the moon launch, race riots were exploding in York, PA where a police officer and a young black woman were both murdered.
  + It had been 50 years, but it felt eerily the same.
* These past couple of weeks I have heard many people opining on what we can do to change things.
  + And many in the church have been asking as well concerning what we can do, as God’s people, in the face of this ongoing tragedy.
  + But I fear that most of the solutions I have heard are just more of the same.
    - The same kinds of programs and policies and trainings and education that I have watched and participated in for the last 50 years.
      * Things that have changed the appearance of things.
      * That have put flesh and muscle on those old dried bones.
    - No one denies that on the surface, much has changed in the way of opportunities and economics.
      * But in 50 years of enormous progress, nothing has changed.
      * A good-looking corpse is still dead.
      * Something is missing.
        + The breath of life.

*8…But there was no breath in them. 9 Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.” 10 So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.*

Now there is a curious thing in both the ancient Hebrew and Koinia Greek in which the Old and New Testaments are written.

* In both languages the word for “breath” has more than one meaning.
  + In Hebrew, the word is *ruah*
  + In Greek *pneuma*
  + Both words mean “breath”, “wind”, and “spirit”.
* After Ezekiel proclaims the Word of God to the bones and they are given flesh and muscle and skin, they are still dead.
  + They still need the spark of life – they need the regenerating breath of God.
  + In this it is like the creation story in Genesis 2, where we read in vs. 7:

*7 then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.*

* + - God first formed the man – giving him bone, flesh, muscle, and skin.
    - But though formed, he was not yet a “living creature”.
    - That happened only when God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life”.
      * Only then did the man come alive.
* We read of this breath again in a different context in John 20:22.
  + Here Jesus is speaking with his disciples – all alive as far as we can tell.
    - But then we read:

*22 And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit”.*

Three times we see God, or the Son of God “breathing” life into humanity.

* But each time, we also find this “breath” is somehow associated not just with life, but with God’s Spirit.
  + In Genesis 1:2, we find the Spirit of God hovering over the primordial earth at creation.

*2 The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.*

* + In Ezekiel 37:14, God explains to Ezekiel his vision and the significance of the breath when he says:

*14 And I will put my Spirit within [them], and [they] shall live…*

* + And, as we saw in John 20:22, Jesus symbolically breathes on his disciples as a way of indicating that he is passing on to them His Holy Spirit.

*22 And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit”.*

* The point in all of this being that that which bring life to that which is dead is the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit.
  + Adam had form but no life until the Spirit of God was breathed into Him.
  + The reconstituted bodies of Ezekiel 37 had no life until God breathed into them His Holy Spirit and regenerated their bodies.
  + And the disciples of Jesus, though trained and practiced in following Jesus, did not have within them the life of Jesus until he breathed it into them in the person of His Holy Spirit.

Friends, what is missing in our nation and in the world – the reason we can only get so far and no further before we fall back again and again into division and anarchy and war – is the regenerating power of the Spirit of the Living God.

* Our world, our nation, our human race needs to be infused with the life-giving breath of God.
* Haven’t you ever wondered how it is possible that the more we change, the more we stay the same?
  + How we may not fight as often as we did in medieval times, but now we have such greater capacity for destruction that we kill more every time we do war with one another?
  + How after Genghis Kahn and Napoleon Bonaparte we still ended up with Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini?
  + How after a Great Depression we can still have the Great Recession?
  + How after the holocaust, there can once again be another round of antisemitism growing in the world today?
  + How is it possible that all of this happens with such regularity that we actually have an axiom for it:
    - “Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”
    - And repeat it we have, over and over and over again – cycle after cycle after cycle.
* We had the breath knocked out of us.
  + Have you ever had “the breath knocked out of you?”
    - Usually its because you have fallen hard.
      * I remember it happening when I fell on my bike as a kid.
      * And when I got hit hard when playing football.
    - It feels like you’re going to die as you gasp for air, wondering if you will ever catch your breath again.
  + In Ephesians 2, Paul writes that all of us had the breath of God knocked out of us when we fell.

*1 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.*

* Without Christ we did not possess the breath of God in our lungs – just as those who have not received the Spirit of God are today.
  + And as such, Paul says, all of the old prejudices and brokenness remained.
    - In his day, these were between Jew and Gentile; slave and free; men and women.
      * For us today the divisions are black and white, rich and poor, powerful and powerless.
    - But it’s all the result of a humanity who had the breath of God knocked out of us when we fell and rebelled and chose to go our own way.
      * Somehow thinking we knew better and could do it better on our own.
      * Which has only led to the cycle of brokenness and bitterness that we are suffering yet again even this week.

*4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions…*

*14 [So] he himself is our peace, who has made the…groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,* *15 …His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity…thus making peace, 16 and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility…18 For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.*

* Earlier, you saw a video of whites and blacks, Asians and Hispanics gathered in Spirit and singing a blessing on their city.
  + What drew them together?
    - On the one hand, it was the Word of God as each of them represented churches that highly valued the Scriptures.
      * Yet, there were multiple denominations represented there who would have several distinct differences in their interpretations of certain Scriptures.
      * And, of course, there were also many significant differences of culture, experiences and upbringing represented as well.
        + Some of those white folks might not ever have faced significant challenges economically or educationally or socially in their whole lives.
        + While some of the black folks represented may have faced multiple challenges just because of the color of their skin.
    - So, again, I ask: what drew them together?
  + The Scriptures we have read today suggest that it is the fact that they share not only the knowledge of God, but rather, they share the breath of God.
    - The same breath fills the lungs of each of them in the person of the Holy Spirit of Jesus.
      * And it is the presence of the Holy Spirit that regenerates their flesh and changes them, making them one “new humanity”.
    - And isn’t that what we really need? A new humanity?
      * A fresh start? A do over?
      * Where relationships between men are no longer based on a history of
        + Slavery and oppression;
        + Dominance and poverty;
        + Fear and injustice;
        + Indifference and riotous fury
      * But instead where repentance, forgiveness, mercy, and grace are the foundation.
        + And understanding, justice and love are the concern of all for all.
      * But this would take a new humanity.
        + To tear down the dividing wall of hostility would require a new humanity.
        + To practice heart-felt humility rather than politically correct white guilt…
        + Love-motivated generosity rather than government enforced reparations…
        + Blind, even-handed justice rather than sensitivity training…
      * It takes a new humanity.
        + Otherwise we’re just putting new flesh on old bones.
        + And the cycle repeats just as it did in the 60’s and then the 70’s; the 80’s and the 90’s; the aughts and the teens; and now the 20’s begin just as the 60’s did.
        + It will take a new humanity to stop it.

But fortunately, that is why Jesus came – to, as Paul said…

*15 …His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity… thus making peace.* (Eph. 2:15)

* But while it is by God’s initiative and power that this happens, we, as Christ’s church, have a part to play.
  + And it begins with catching our breath ourselves.
    - You cannot share what you do not have.
      * Before Ezekiel could prophesy to the bones and preach to the wind he first had to catch God’s breath, himself.
      * In other words, before chapter 37 could take place, chapters 1, 2, and 3 had to happen.
        + Where Ezekiel had an encounter with God that ended with him being overwhelmed by the Spirit of God.

*14 The Spirit lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness in the heat of my spirit, the hand of the Lord being strong upon me. 15 And I came to the exiles at Tel-abib, who were dwelling by the Chebar canal, and I sat where they were dwelling. And I sat there overwhelmed among them seven days.*

* + - * Ezekiel had to “catch His breath”.
  + The same was true of the first believers who had a story to tell to the nations.
    - Jesus, the Messiah, had come.
      * He lived sinlessly, was crucified innocently for OUR sin, and had risen from the dead to give us victory over the grave and create a new humanity to bring glory to our God.
    - But just before His ascension into heaven Jesus told them to wait before they said anything to anyone.

*4…“Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. 5 For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”*

*8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

* + - They needed to “catch His breath” before there could be a “new humanity”.
      * Then in Acts 2:1, we read:

*1 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.*

* + - Here is the breath – the wind – of Ezekiel 37!

*9 Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’”*

* + And once these followers of Jesus caught His breath, that is exactly what they did:

*4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them.*

* + - But first they had to catch His breath.
* Friends, I believe there is a shortness of breath in much of the church today.
  + We have been trying to reform humanity by our good ideas and inventive programs for decades.
    - Many of these good ideas have arisen from our faith and the truths of the Word of God.
    - And we have been able to “flesh out”, if you will, a picture of a new humanity – but the reality of a new humanity continued to be outside our reach.
  + Well, perhaps we have a grasp on the Word, but are experiencing a shortness of breath.
    - For it is only by the initiation of God and the infusion of life by His Spirit in Christ Jesus that this new humanity can be created.
    - So, maybe, in these days when the cycle of the same old humanity is making itself known, we should stop and catch our breath – His breath.
      * Like Ezekiel who sat overwhelmed by the Spirit of God for a full week before ever speaking.
      * Or the disciples of Jesus, who spent 10 days in an upper room praying as they waited for the breath of God to infuse them with power.
      * Maybe we need to stop our pontificating and postulating and instead pray.
        + Pray that we might catch our breath.
* But then what?
  + Politic, Protest, and Program?
    - Maybe some, but friends, history has demonstrated that that can only get us so far.
      * We can flesh out the idea of a new humanity, but can not bring it to life.
  + No, with Ezekiel and the Disciples and with Jesus, Himself we instead Proclaim, Prophesy and Pray in the Power of the Holy Spirit.
    - Look at how Jesus described his own ministry in Luke 4.
      * He had just come out of the wilderness after having been tempted by Satan.
      * And note how Luke says he came out:

*14 Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit…*

* + - * + He came riding the wind.
        + And his first stop was at the local synagogue in his home town of Nazareth.
        + And when he was given the opportunity to read the Scriptures of the day, he found and read this from Isaiah 58 and 61:

*18 “The Spirit of the Lord is on me,*

*because he has anointed me* [that is, He has filled me with His breath]

*to proclaim good news to the poor.*

*He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners*

*and recovery of sight for the blind,*

*to set the oppressed free,*

*19 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

* + Just as Ezekiel prophesied over dry bones, Jesus proclaimed the Lord’s favor to the poor, to the imprisoned, to the blind and to the oppressed.
    - He shone a light in the darkness and spoke truth to the powerful.
    - He was both preacher and prophet – and then martyr and savior.

And in the light of the chaos overwhelming our nation right now, that seems so…powerless.

* If you feel that way, then you are in good company.
  + For after Jesus had been ministering for a while, John the Baptist sent him a message from his prison cell asking: *Are you really the one, or should we expect someone else?*
  + After all, all he saw happening was a lot of preaching, story telling and some personal miracles and healing.
    - But there was no great movement – no throwing off the oppression of the Romans – no grand transformation in the life and situation of Israel.
    - Where is the change? Where is the new humanity?
* But here is how Jesus answered John in Luke 7:22-23

*22 So he replied to the messengers, “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. 23 Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”*

* + Jesus’ answer was a reference to what John would recognize as the Old Testament description of the Messianic age, when justice would prevail and oppression would cease.
  + And in the power of the Spirit of God, Jesus was going about the task of creating a new humanity.
    - A task that would eventually demand his life in order to give these dry bones the breath of life.

So, church, catch your breath and in the power of the only One who can breath life into this earth…

* Proclaim Good News to the dry bones – those who are oppressed and weary.
  + Proclaim it in the way we live.
  + Proclaim it in the way we love.
  + Proclaim it in the One we share.
* But also prophesy truth to the powerful, justice to the oppressor, and generosity to the wealthy.
  + Knowing that this will not make you powerful or wealthy yourself.
  + Knowing that power resists the prophetic and eventually seeks to silence it.
* And pray in the Spirit for our nation and the peoples of the earth that the day of Christ’s new humanity might soon be upon us.
  + Come together as the church and be a blessing to our city, our state, our nation and our world.
  + Breathe the breath of God upon our communities and watch dry bones come to life in Christ Jesus.

**Benediction**

In the words of the old hymn:

*Breathe on us, Breath of God,*

*Fill us with life anew,*

*That we may love what Thou dost love,*

*And do what Thou wouldst do.*