

Dry Bones and Breath-filled Lives: A Meditation (Ezekiel 37:1-14)

By John M. Johnson

Life has a way of knocking the breathⁱ out of us. YHWHⁱⁱ has a way of reviving us.

A word of context: Ezekiel 37:1-14 consists of both story (a parable) and its application.

God's people have been carried off into exile. The people have been banished from the very land promised and provided them by God. This caused great consternation, confusion, and soul-searching. Questions, BIG QUESTIONS, were threatening to swamp the community. Questions such as:

- Why do we find ourselves in this predicament at this time? Why this exile?
- Is God present in this foreign place or have we been abandoned forever?
- Have the gods of the Babylonians defeated our God? Has YHWH been tossed down forever?
- Is there a future for us? Is there hope in the midst of this catastrophe and is there hope beyond this catastrophe?

If one reads the prophecy of Ezekiel carefully, one can find answers to these questions. In Ezekiel 37 we can hear the people crying: "We have been cut off. We are like dried-out, lifeless bones. We have been tossed aside. We have been abandoned. We are landless, hopeless, and breathless."

It is this very prophet, Ezekiel, whom YHWH directs and commands, works through, and through whom he extends his divine promises to this exiled community. The message of Ezekiel to the landless, hopeless, and breathless is that God is not finished. He is sending his Holy Spirit to restore, refresh, and breathe life and hope into the community.

To a people cut off from home, God promises a return to the land (vv. 12, 14).

To a people who feel they have been cut off from God, God promises open graves and the experience of new life (vv. 12, 14).

To a people cut off from the knowledge and experience of God, God promises that they shall know and experience YHWH (v. 13).

To a people that feel they are cut off completely from life, God promises that he will put his spirit within them (not just individuals but more specifically the entire Exile community) (v. 14).

What was true for the Exile community was also true for the disciples awaiting the promised Spirit between the resurrection and Pentecost. And what was true for them is true for us. "Breathe on us, Breath of God...and we will surely live."

ⁱ The Hebrew word for breath is *ruach*. This is the same word used for wind and spirit. It is found in Genesis 1:2 and Job 33:4 and many other places in the Hebrew Bible. The image is picked up in John 20:22. Certainly the whole story of Pentecost found in Acts 2 is enhanced when the concept of *ruach* is addressed.

ⁱⁱ YHWH is the "unspoken" name of God. YHWH is the God who introduced himself to Moses in the wilderness as "I AM who I AM" or perhaps "I WILL BE who I WILL BE" (Ex 3). Across the narrative of the Hebrew Bible YHWH is presented as "The One who is active and present in every situation to bring about the deliverance of his people." That is certainly the case in Ezekiel 37.

