

SPEAK LIFE?

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Reading: Ezekiel 37:1–14

Seth notes that the Hebrew word “ruach” in the passage can mean “breath” or “spirit.” And YHWH is the proper name of God, commonly understood to mean “I am who I am” or “I am who I will be” or “I am existence.” The pronunciation of YHWH is debated.

With the hand of YHWH upon me, I was carried out and set down in the middle of the valley, and it was full of bones—there were so many bones lying in the valley, and they were so dry! I was asked, “Human being, can these bones live?” I answered, “YHWH! Only you know that!” Then it was said to me, “Prophesy over these bones! Say to them, ‘Dry bones! Hear what YHWH has to say! To these bones YHWH says, I will make breath/spirit enter you, and you will live. I will attach ligaments to you, make flesh grow on you, cover you with skin and put breath/spirit in you. You will live, and you will know that I am YHWH.’”

So I prophesied as ordered; and while I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound; it was the bones coming together, each bone in its proper place. As I watched, ligaments grew on them, flesh appeared and skin covered them; but there was no breath in them. I was next told to, “Prophesy to the breath! Prophesy, human being! Say to the breath that YHWH says, ‘Come from the four winds, spirit; and breathe on these slain, so that they can live.’”

So I prophesied as ordered, and the breath came into them, and they were alive! They stood up on their feet, a huge army! Then I was told, “Human being! These bones are the whole house of Isra’el; and they are saying, ‘Our bones have dried up, our hope is gone, and we are completely cut off.’ Therefore prophesy; say to them that YHWH says, ‘My people! I will open your graves and make you get up out of your graves, and I will bring you into the land of Isra’el. Then you will know that I am YHWH—when I have opened your graves and made you get up out of your graves, my people! I will put my Spirit in you; and you will be alive. Then I will place you in your own land; and you will know that I, YHWH, have spoken, and that I have done it,’ says YHWH.”

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It is a gift to be able to return to our “Command to Preach” series today with this submission from Kareem Murphy. Unfortunately, Kareem is unable to be here today as he and DeWayne are off on some well-deserved vacation adventures. Fortunately, he sent some thoughts along to help us understand his interest in this particular piece of scripture. He also said this in his email:

I’ve never heard a bad sermon when this was the text. Quite the opposite, I’ve heard some of the best sermons I’ve ever heard that were rooted in this text. I want to see what Plymouth will do with it. [saying all of this with a playful smirk]

I am grateful to you, Kareem, for this gift and will do my best to not break your streak of excellent and creative sermons on this passage today—and maybe I am a little glad you aren’t here in case I become the exception that proves the rule—also said with a playful smirk!

I can understand why this passage is preached frequently and powerfully. It is a compelling piece of text. The story is visceral and descriptive, concise yet full, unsettling and yet somehow beautiful. The story of

the valley of dry bones speaks to our nightmares, and yet in this story we are not alone. God is a companion here and speaks to our hopes and not our fears, to life and not to death, to breath and not suffocation. This illustration invites us in and then tells us exactly what this vision means. This allows us, listeners in a very different set of circumstances, to then find our own ways into the story with all its deeper and attendant meanings.

What do we know then of the original circumstances? Chapter 37 is towards the end of the Book of Ezekiel, which is found in the First Testament, or the Hebrew Bible. This book was written about three thousand years ago, in the fifth century BCE, near the city of Babylon by a person named Ezekiel, who was likely a member of the priestly class. In that era there was a power struggle between the large kingdoms of the East like the Assyrians and the Babylonians versus the Egyptians in the West. This left little kingdoms in the middle, like Israel and Judah, to get caught up in wars not of their own making. The conquering Babylonians took a large number of mostly wealthy and learned people from Jerusalem and forced them into exile in Babylon.

Ezekiel, whose name means “God strengthens” is considered a prophet in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The first part of this book describes all the reasons why Ezekiel thought Israel deserved to be overrun and sent into exile: idol worship, ignoring the most vulnerable, rulers without wisdom or care. When the city of Jerusalem is eventually destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, Ezekiel’s prophecy comes true. So, the second half of the book pivots to the future, the rebuilding of YHWH’s people and making sure they never have to go through this experience again.

And that is the context of this vision. Ezekiel finds himself in a valley full of death, of bones, of hopelessness. God asks Ezekiel to breathe life into the bones, and they slowly start to reassemble themselves, but they were still not alive again. God commands him again to prophesy breath into them and they were once again living! Then God explains that the dry bones were the exiles of Jerusalem, empty and hopeless, and that God, through Ezekiel, breathed new life into them with the promise of hope and someday a return home. “I will put my Spirit in you; and you will be alive. Then I will place you in your own land.”

Today we are not exiles from Jerusalem, and many of us are not waiting to return to a war-ravaged home. Yet we too occasionally find ourselves in a valley of bones—but our dry bones are something else. We also find ourselves in times of hopelessness, but we are seeking a different hoped-for future. We too find ourselves seeking the breath of God to reanimate life. We too are in a cycle of life, death, and rebirth and are searching for meaning in the face of the unknown. God here, once again, reminds us that there is a rebirth after death, that death is not the end of the story. The metaphorical bones can receive new breath, new spirit, and new life.

Each of our valleys of dry bones differ from another’s, though we also occupy some together. Like Ezekiel and the other exiles, some of us may be feeling like we are awaiting our invitation to go home. Some of us may feel like strangers in a strange land and are seeking the breath of life to give us hope in the unfamiliar. Some of us may be encountering death, holding our grief gently while wondering what rebirth is awaiting us on the other side of our loss.

We also live in a society with valleys of lifelessness. We are surrounded by the dry bones of greed and selfishness, the glorification of violence, and the diminishment of communal and individual dignity. White supremacy and colonization, patriarchy and gender rigidity fill our valleys with the dry bones of marginalization, minimization and disastrous judgment. We find ourselves in spaces of war and the power-grabbing of the unimaginative. Our valleys of dry bones, individual and collective, are multiple. We can place ourselves in this story in so many ways; our hopelessness is not singularly defined.

Yet, we are not alone. Like Ezekiel, we find God accompanying us in this desolate place. God is not only God in the pleasant places but also with us in these valleys. God is with us all the time if we are only brave

enough to remember to look. It may sometimes feel that we are the ones so often seeking answers from God, and yet, if we are listening, God is questioning back, “Human being, can these bones live?” God, who is present with us, turns to us to ask what we think is possible.

Then we are asked to act. It was Ezekiel who was tasked with speaking to the bones, not YHWH. And they reassembled. It was Ezekiel and not God who called for the breath (or spirit) to fill the reassembled bodies and make them live again. It is our responsibility to speak life. God accompanies us and enables us, but we must do the work.

Kareem wisely names this in his proposal. He says: “For me, faith is action; faith is experience. It is through those experiences that I find meaning in the world. In this scripture, there are powerful actions that give life, that give new life. That gives new life from old bodies. That gives powerful life into discarded bodies. When I read this scripture, I see a story about how God uses us humans to speak life into the dispossessed, the discarded, those rendered dead. Our words matter. The act of speaking can bring life where life is absent.”

Our words matter. Our actions matter. The act of speaking can bring life where life is absent. We can speak life.

How do you speak life? How do you turn the metaphorical bones of your experience, of your circumstances, of your communities and transform them into life? How do you breathe life, speak life, turn death into rebirth? How do you respond when you are asked: “Human being, can these bones live?”

In Hebrew the word for “name” is “shem.” And in the culture of the ancient Israelites, your name was more than a label, it was your very character. To say your name was to hold all that you are, all your gifts and curses, your very being. This word “shem” is also found in the verb “to breathe.” Breath was more than an inhalation and exhalation, it was the distillation and sharing of your being. Your name and breath are inseparable, you breathe who you are, you breathe your very character.¹ The same goes for God. The breath and spirit of God are inseparable from the being of God. When the breath came upon the bones, the very being of God, the hope of God, the love of God, the existence and essence of YHWH was given to those bones.

As we are reminded to bring the breath of life into the dead bones of our lives, we are each doing so with our own unique gifts and curses. You are not breathing life merely as one undifferentiated human animal, rather you are speaking life in the unique and special ways that you are capable of doing so, the ways that your gifts and experiences become part of the fabric of your community. Who you are matters because only you can speak life in the ways that are rooted in your very being.

On Friday about 20 young people, each unique and talented in their own way, came together as a community and performed a play they created in our Conn Theater. They really spoke life into existence on that stage! The story surrounded a future in which the last tree needed to be saved from being cut down and replaced with pavement and glass and steel. One final hold-out of life was about to get buried in the dry bones of the lifelessness of pavement and steel. The promise of God is that even if that valley fills up with dry bones, we can again breathe life into it. There is always some sort of rebirth after death.

How do you speak life? If you don't feel that you do, how can you begin? All you have to do is be you and offer your gifts into the community. Our words matter. Our actions matter. The act of speaking can bring life where life has been absent. We can speak life.

¹Jeff A. Benner, “The Pronunciation of the name יהוה (YHWH),” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wRsbSLU9oFA> (accessed August 31, 2022).