

Sermon – March 26, 2023

Pastor Dan Hollis

Ezekiel 37:1-14

When I was a kid, I was a big fan of “The Magic School Bus.” It was a book series and an animated TV show aimed at kids, all about a class of schoolchildren whose teacher would take them on wild field trips with the help of the “Magic School Bus.”

I probably had pretty much all the books, and I’m sure I watched every episode over the years—they swam with an octopus, surfed sound waves, traveled the stars, they rode a raft on a lava flow, and even shrunk down to drive through one of their classmate’s nostrils.

The theme song of the cartoon was performed by none other than Little Richard, and it included the words, “So strap your bones right to the seat, come on in and don’t be shy. Just to make your day complete you might get baked into a pie.” And, while seeing a pie get baked from the inside was a neat episode, it’s the *first* part that’s more relevant for today. What better way to greet people coming into church to listen to the story of Ezekiel’s dry bones than: “Strap your bones right to the seat, come on in and don’t be shy.”

And we’ll get back to bones in a minute, but first I want to talk about *muscles*. See, one episode of The Magic School Bus had them shrink the bus down and go into their teacher’s blood vessels while she was competing in a triathlon. Don’t worry, none of the underage *kids* were doing the driving—the class’s pet *lizard* handled all that.

At the microscopic level, they were able to watch *oxygen* at work. The lungs breathed in air, and transferred these little puffs of white gas into every passing blood cell, which would turn from a deep purple to a bright healthy red when it filled with oxygen. Then the red blood cells traveled to the heart, which pumped them all throughout the body and eventually to the leg muscles. The kids watched as the muscles sucked up the oxygen from the blood cells, and expelled gray goopy looking waste that the blood cells—now purple again—would carry *back* to the lungs to get breathed *out* and start the whole process again.

Now when their teacher wasn’t *breathing* enough during her race, the blood cells couldn’t keep up with all the waste the muscles were giving off... so the class got out mops and buckets to make up the difference.

Now, we don’t have a bus full of schoolchildren inside us to help keep us fresh and functional. All we have is air. But it wasn’t just air that got Ezekiel’s dry bones up and running. It was the Holy Spirit. And I think we could *all* use a bit of that... to get *our* bones up out of the seat.

In Confirmation Class recently we were learning about the Holy Spirit, and I described it as God’s active presence in the world. God is at work in and around us, in the

form of the Holy Spirit, and it was that Spirit we see at work in our reading today from the book of Ezekiel. The prophet Ezekiel had a vision—and I say vision because that’s the word Ezekiel uses, and because I don’t want you to think we’re talking about a bunch of actual zombies getting up and walking around. God was trying to explain something to Ezekiel, and the best way God could *do* that was to give him a vision—a vision to help him... look at something in a new way. And I think the most important *elements* of that vision—the things God wanted Ezekiel to think about *differently*—were dry bones, and breath.

The Hebrew word *ruach*, like the Greek word *pneuma*, can mean “wind” or “breath” or “spirit.” It’s a homophone—words that sound the same but can mean different things.

And the Bible likes to be poetic, so it takes advantage of this wordplay a lot. In the beginning, in Genesis, the *spirit* or *wind* of God swept over the face of the waters, *and* it gave humans the *breath* of life. In the New Testament, Jesus says to Nicodemus, “Wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

So I want you to remember that when we think about the vision Ezekiel had of them dry bones lying in that valley. “Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I 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.”

Now when the vision was over, God told Ezekiel that these bones represented his people, the Israelites, who had been exiled from their homeland and had everything that was important to them taken away, even their hope. You can imagine people in that situation *feeling* like a bunch of dry, dead bones, ready to just lay down in a valley and let the sand cover them up. But God didn’t want those bones to lie dormant, to give up, to dry out. God wanted those bones to *live*.

“Then 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 those slain, that they may live.’ And then God said to the people: “I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.” Spirit. Breath. A great wind to get in among those bones and rattle them awake. That’s what they needed... and that’s what we need too, isn’t it?

The singer Katy Perry once asked the age-old question: “Do you ever feel like a plastic bag, drifting through the wind, wanting to start again?” Well I think through this reading, God is asking all of us: “Do you ever feel like them dry bones? Couldn’t you use a little wind, a little breath, a little Spirit, yourself?”

So I want you to think about the Magic School Bus again. Think about those kids, who knew that their teacher’s muscles weren’t doing what they needed to do. And they got

right on in there and saw what needed to happen. Her muscles needed more oxygen, brought in from her lungs, to her heart, to her bloodstream and throughout her whole body. And they needed those blood cells to carry all the carbon dioxide back into her lungs so she could breathe it out and get rid of it.

Well you—all of us—are that muscle. We need oxygen to live. You need air to live. And what's another word for air? Spirit. And what can God's Spirit do for you?

When we invite God's Spirit into us, when we allow it to do its work within us... when we breathe it in it can feed our soul just like oxygen feeds our muscles. *And*, just like the waste your muscles exude that gets carried out of your body on your very breath, so too can the breath of the Holy Spirit carry out all of that gray goopy gunk from our *souls*. We breathe in oxygen and breathe out carbon dioxide. So when we breathe in the active presence of God, what is it that we breathe out?

What is it that's got your bones all dried out today? What is it that's got you feeling like a plastic bag full o' trash on the side of the road? What is it that's gummin' up your works, and needs a tiny bus full of kids with mops to clean it up?

"I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude."

I've never been any good at Spring cleaning, but *God* is an expert.

So if you open yourself up to the idea of God doing something fresh and new in you, and if you go straight to the source and breathe in the breath of God, there's no telling what kind of Spring cleaning God can do in you. What gunk God can clean out that's been slowing you down, and what fresh air God can let in to wake those dry bones up.

I want you to think about that this week. Remember the muscles and the blood cells, remember Ezekiel and his dry bones, and yes, even remember the Magic School Bus. Because God had to hammer *seven* visions into Ezekiel's head to get *him* to remember what he had to, and I don't have that kind of time this morning.

So I want you to try something. After the sermon every week, Wendell plays a little meditative music. Like 30 seconds, 45 tops, before we move into the rest of the service. But it allows the message of the sermon a moment to sink in, and to give all of us the opportunity to meditate in the presence of God at work.

So during that meditative time, which will start in just a few moments, I want you to join me in trying something.

Some people call it "box breathing" or even "sniper breathing," and here's my version. At the end of the sermon, I want you to breathe out and release all the air from your lungs. And as the music starts to play, I want you to breathe in through your nose if

you can while slowly counting to four in your head. Then I want you to hold that breath in for another count of four. And then breathe out for a count of four. Hold for four more, then breathe in. Four in, four hold, four out, four hold, and again and again... until the music's over.

And as you breathe in for that four count, imagine breathing in the Spirit of God. As you hold it gently, imagine it doing its transformative work within you. And as you breathe out, imagine it taking away with it whatever it is that drags you down and dries you up.

Let's do that together, and may we feel the Spirit in our bones. Amen.