

# *Let These Bones Live*

## *Ezekiel 37:1-14*

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Listen. Do you hear that voice? It's repeating:

I'm sorry. I can't breathe. No really, I cannot breathe. Hear me with my last breath. I am suffocating. Poison is filling my lungs. My airway is closing off. My lungs can't expand. The walls of my soul are caving in. I can't make it from here to there. I can't move— not by crawling on all fours and not even if I inch on my elbows. Did you hear me? I can't move. I don't have anything left within me. Please don't drag me. My vertebrae are crushed. My ligaments are dislodged. I can't breathe. I can't move. I just have to lie right here.

When the pain of the soul-suffocating and death-dealing despair lands on the flesh of this creation, the only thing that can be heard is: "We cannot breathe. They cannot breathe. In labor pangs creation groans, fading breath moans, and we ourselves inwardly and outwardly plead for the redemption of these bodies. We can't breathe."

It seems we aren't the only ones struggling for air. The bones of the house of Israel cry out— We can't breathe. We find ourselves yet again in one of these strange passages in the book of Ezekiel. Living creatures with wings and wheels within wheels exist. There are time warps between valleys and caves and movement between being silent and speaking. Tornado-like whirlwinds sweep up people and place them intact within virtual realities. In virtual reality, there is a valley of dry bones with strange things happening. But then, the whirlwind rushes in, delivering us back to real-time. And now, in real time, not virtual reality, the bones are speaking. The created of God are saying "Our bones are dried up. Our hope is lost; we are cut off completely" (37:11). It is dry and desolate here; we are exiled from any possibility of life. We can't breathe.

You can only say hope is lost if you have known the seeds of belief. You can only say we have been cut off if you know what it means to feel in sync and connected. You only know death because you feel the absence of life. The bones lament what they have once known to be in-part, no longer being at all. They scream, "We can't breathe!"

We're often told that if you can speak, you can breathe. But sometimes it sure feels like your last breath, and we pray to God it is not. To say "I can't breathe" is not always about the complete absence of air, but more about the quantity and quality of air. To say, "I can't breathe" is to say that what I'm getting and feeling right now isn't all that it could be. These are not the deep breaths of life-giving air. Life-giving air is generated beyond the four corners of the earth in the cosmos, filtered thru the leaves of the branches of the highest sycamore tree. No instead, this air feels tainted with broken dreams, painful setbacks, discord, and the absence of harmonic rhythms.

This air is tainted with a looming death penalty and no chance of parole. The air is polluted as we imitate life here instead of being alive over there on sustaining soil.

The chains clank together as lands are stolen while bodies in search of life are sold and bartered as goods between borders. They are bartered across the borders of New York and Canada, Texas and Mexico, across Ohio and the Pennsylvania Turnpike clear to Atlanta, and over the ocean. The air is tainted with cries of “Crucify him, crucify him” and “Save yourself.” Believe me when I say we can’t breathe. This isn’t what it means to be fully alive.

Here in this place, we witness an imitation of living. It ain’t living at all. It’s like walking around the valley, lingering behind the mortal but taking a step closer to peer in on what’s happening. And suddenly you realize there is a noise, a rattling, and the bones come together, bone to bone. You look again, and there is connective tissue on them, and flesh has come upon them, and skin has covered them; but there is no breath in them. You squint and realize they are not yet alive (37:7-8).

They are still cut off from an expanding spirit of life that has its beginning and end in God. Right here, in this valley, bone is on bone rubbing and grinding together in teeth-gritting undeniable agony — rattling. It doesn’t seem to matter how they got there or why they are there. Their history in this moment needs not be named, it only matters that they can’t breathe. They are where they are. They are where they are without the ability to inhale deeply the life-giving breath that bears witness to God; the life-giving breath promised to them; the promise of which they are reminded and that echoes even as they are surrounded by the valley.

God declares, “I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves... you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act...” (37:12-14). The promise of life means that the created of God are to be placed on sustaining soil with the freedom to have gardens, host dinner parties, be in community, have access to what keeps life healthy, lungs filled and sustained, while children run free of separation from their parents and violence in their neighborhoods. The promise of life means having uninterrupted access to water without the threat of thick sludge-like substances and invisible fumes tainting liquid oxygen.

In the valley, the promise is life. The promise is not the imitation of life. The full spirit that traverses the universe thru space and time comes to take up habitation amongst and in brittle bones. Nothing is lost, nothing can be discarded, nothing is too contaminated, all the bones shall live. This is the grandiose, strange, and full promise the mere human is entrusted to proclaim—commanded to proclaim and invited to pursue. Nothing less. Nothing short of it. This is a large promise that frightens us; it sometimes frightens me. What if I’m wrong? How can I say with confidence that life will come? How can I declare life and say that death is not the final word, when we have seen death? We know death. We are charged to declare this large promise. Because as people of faith just as much as we know that we have witnessed death, we know, that we know that we know, the possibility of life resuscitated by the spirit of a living God. And this is the possibility we are called to pursue relentlessly.

There is a wonderful line at the end of August Wilson’s play *How I Learned what I Learned*. In this play he offers an autobiographical glimpse of his time in what’s known as the Hill district of Pittsburgh. Near the very end of the production, he turns to the audience and says, “How do you know what you know? You don’t, until you do.” Here, in the valley of the book of Ezekiel, this mere human being has just had

an “until you do” moment. At the beginning of the passage God asks, “Mortal, can these bones live?” This is an invitation, an invitation to participate in a God-given exchange, “Come play with me. Come make life with me.”

Instead of a resounding “Yes! I will come play and create with you,” the human messenger offers a different, less zealous, less certain response— “Only you know God” (37:3). It feels like our own hesitation and timidity at moments when we’re faced with what we perceive as the lofty and tall order of trying to conjure life in the midst of despair and death. I imagine it as our sometimes shrinking back, and not without reason. We shrink back because of all the things we have seen and lived and all the contradictions in our midst. We do not want to be disappointed or disappoint yet again. This isn’t the first message Ezekiel has had to carry, and to be frank, some of the other messages had nothing to do with living.

As Ezekiel is creeping back into the shadows of hesitation, God says, “I’m not going to let you off the hook that easily. I’m going to show you. I’m going to tell you, and you will speak. Preach to the bones and say to them....” The Lord says, “I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live” (37:4-5). And sure enough, if we wander into the valley to peep over the shoulders of the mortal and peer a little closer, he begins calling the four winds from the corners of the earth. And then, the winds come into the bones, mighty and rushing, but not destroying. The bones lived. They stood on their feet, all of them vast in numbers (37:9-10). Nothing is lost. Not the pain, not the suffering, not the tears, not the sleepless nights. Not the days when life was not the way it should be. Nothing is lost.

As the bones begin to live, I have to imagine that without a shadow of a doubt, Ezekiel knows that he knows that he knows. He cannot deny it. He’s seen the glimpse of not the imitation of life, but the full presence of life that bears witness to who God is. Even if we want to back off and shrink back in humility and embrace our human limitations, God will not let us off the hook. Once we feel the mighty rushing wind, the gentle breeze, or the life-giving air that infiltrates our nostrils and fills our lungs with glimpses of possibility, we cannot let it go. It cannot be undone.

Once taxis stop making drop offs at airports and bodies show up to protect bodies from deportation and advocate for freedom, the wind begins to gather us up. Once bodies fill the streets to declare the sanctity of life, the breeze begins to blow. When we offer shelter to those who have been denied sanctuary, the trees begin to rustle. Small whirlwinds break in where bit by bit we make our way to all bellies being satiated and filled. This is what keeps us hoping for the full wind, chasing after it, and stirs our memories for the imaginings of life anew— until it fades again.

“I can’t breathe. We can’t breathe.” When these thoughts and words echo and resound from the depths of bone on bone and collapsing lungs filling our midst, it is the call for the imitation life to be stirred once again by the bold promise God offers. “I can’t breathe” begs for the whirlwind coming from beyond the cosmos being filtered through the leaves on the highest branch of the tallest sycamore tree. “We can’t breathe” begs for us to be swept away into the valley with an audacity to proclaim life— be it to our own dry bones, the bones of others, or the bones of stale but death-dealing institutions.

In this valley God turns to us saying, “Mortal, will you let these bones live? You can help create life? Say what you know that you know that you know. Speak life. Pursue life. Call in my life-giving spirit.” God reminds us that resurrection is not

only a far off thought, out there in the by and by, or stories from long ago, but that resurrection is continual and needs to happen today right where we sit, so that flesh is given the chance to live once again.

Life has its beginning and end in God. The presence of life bears witness to God. By life we know God, and by God we know what it means to be filled and carried by a life-giving, ever yielding, and producing spirit. This spirit is the breath that compels us to live more. The spirit of resurrection calls us to resuscitate life and call it back in the valleys of our world. The valley awaits the message of truth and hope only the prophet and the prophet in each us can bring. Will you let these bones live? Chase hope down. Call the breath from the cosmos so that we may live. Dance as protest to death. Sing familiar melodies in strange lands until life is ushered in. Let these bones live! The breath has come and we must live. Oh, mortal, these bones shall live!