

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend David J. Powers  
June 19, 2022

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### John 20:19-23

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

### Ezekiel 37: 1-14

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. 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, and you shall know that I am the Lord."

So I prophesied as I had been commanded, and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them, but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophesy 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 these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophesy and say to them: Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves and bring you up from your graves, O my people, and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord when I open your graves and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord."

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take another deep breath in

and breathe it out slowly

to breathe in god's mercies

and to breathe out god's mercies to others to breathe in god's mercies

and to breathe out god's mercies to others

the breath is the source of our life it's this holy thing this breathing that we get to do you all know that i spent the second half of may on a voyage called quest west we took about a dozen college students out west and you're probably going to hear more stories about that trip than you want to over the rest of this summer but we basically spent two and a half weeks hiking and riding in a 15 passenger van and another van across the uh the southwest and west and uh and many of y'all know that i needed that trip right our session was really supportive even though we had a lot of things going on here of me going on that trip the personnel committee particularly was like we hope you're going to continue to go and so i did and it took about a day of being on the trip for me to uh to finally take a deep breath right maybe you've had that season in your life maybe you're in it right now where when you're in the midst of it in the thick of it you actually don't know that you're not breathing like you should be breathing right until there's a moment of quiet and a few days of rest and then you take a deep breath in that fills your lungs more than they've been filled in months and it's at that moment when you realize oh i have not been breathing like i need to be

it's an interesting thing because the research would tell us that we breathe deeply and well when we feel safe when we feel protected when we feel welcomed that's actually when we'll allow our lungs and our chest to expand and take in those deep breaths so i was uh hiking through many a valley over those couple weeks that i was out west and in each of them whether it was the grand canyon or antelope canyon whether it was bryce or zion or death valley later yosemite valley in all of those i tried to take a moment each time i was there and begin my day with just taking a big deep breath in

breathing in the air the dry air from the grand canyon the sandy air from antelope the the dry air again mostly dry air y'all actually i'm not gonna describe the air the air was mostly dry we were in the west uh breathing in air from all these places okay uh yosemite was nice and um but otherwise we were in some arid climates right and i would take that deep breath in and uh and when we were in our last day of the trip at lake tahoe we were sitting around a campfire i was breathing in kind of that smoky air we were making s'mores with everyone we were reminiscing on the last few weeks together and i thought about it and i thought you know i've been taking deep breaths everywhere i've gone and that's been really important to me because it's it's helped me relax and feel safe and but it's also really important to me because i'm not going to be able to evacuate all that air out of my lungs so i'm going to go home to memphis but when i get home

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i'm going to have just a breath of death valley and a breath of yosemite and a breath of antelope and the breath of bryce and zion and the grand canyon they're still going to be in my lungs it might be significantly less than when i was there but i'm still carrying that breath from that place

i happened to go on that trip with a friend of mine who was at birth restricted in her breathing she had about 75 lung capacity and then she decided to volunteer to be a chaplain in the hospital during covid and at the very end of the of the um let's see delta variant she she contracted delta and has some long-term effects and so 75 percent was drawn back to 50 and so so the activities that she used to love to do and go on hikes and and be the most energetic of all the leaders they those aren't the same for her anymore she has to adjust now to a new way of breathing still feeling full but in a very different way breath y'all is a holy and sacred act it is for me it is for us it was for the people of god too our hebrew brothers and sisters even their their name for god yahweh is actually is actually a breath in and of itself perhaps you know this right yahweh would be breathing in

we don't speak the word of god in the hebrew tradition we we simply breathe and god is brought in and then shared with the world yah way walter bruggeman says that the bible struggles generally to find adequate vocabulary to speak about and name this unutterable irresistible undomesticated force that surges into the history of the world to liberate and to heal and to remake and to transform and so we are left with this code term called ruach

to speak about what we know that we cannot even say ruach is the hebrew word for breath but it also means spirit and it also means wind and so ezekiel is brought in this vision by the divine into a valley full of dry bones there are many of them and they are very dry he wants us to get the picture there is no life in this place and the divine asks can you see can these bones live prophet of god can these bones live

ezekiel rightly says you know god you know the answer to that question better than i do and then ezekiel is commanded to prophesy first through the bones and they rattle together and then sinews and then skin and all of a sudden where these bones have been strewn out across the valley there's this mass of people human beings incarnate in front of ezekiel but they're not alive

and then god instructs him to to prophesy to the four winds to draw from east and west and north and south you all remember we ended worship last week with in christ there is no east and west in hymn no south or north right ezekiel was called to to draw that ruach the wind from each of the corners of the world and then to breathe it upon that valley

then all of a sudden that which was dead is alive again

these bones these bones are the whole house of israel they are the whole group of the faithful god tells ezekiel

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the dry bones of israel they shall know that i am the lord when i open their graves and bring them up from the graves

in verse 14 god says i will put my spirit within you and you shall live and i will place you on your own soil and then you shall know that i the lord have spoken and will act says the lord and if we are to imagine that god is drawing us into that valley this day it's it's not hard for us to place ourselves there the valley is a place of grief it's a place of disconnection it's a place of separation it's a place of despair and discouragement and so it's really not hard then for us to place ourselves in that valley

it's not hard for for you to place yourself in that valley that place of despair disconnection separation whether it's at work or at home or at school in your personal life life or in your spiritual life we all have those valleys each and every single one of us we are to imagine that valley as our soul then we can probably name some things that feel disconnected that feel discouraged that feels separated if we are to imagine the world then also as that valley it's not hard to imagine that either as we see continued violence

as we see a lack of will to really do anything to stop and protect god's people here it's not all that hard to see our world as inhabiting the valley

but then in the midst of that valley we see these bones begin to rattle together at the words of the prophet and we see god breathing life back into the people ruach the winds drawn from the four corners of the world

we ask ourselves in our personal valleys and our communal valleys how does god put things back together

how do bones scattered separated how do they how do they come back together by the power of the divine how does god enliven that which is dead

mary oliver asks an important question listen she says are you breathing just a little and calling it a life and i wonder if oliver's question her poetic question is actually a question for you this day i wonder if when you listen to your breathing

you're breathing just a little and calling it a life i wonder if her question isn't just a question for you but for the church of jesus christ if we're talking about being the body of christ in the world i wonder if it's a question for each and every single one of us are we breathing just a little and calling it a life or are we the people of god willing to be led by the divine into the places of disconnection into the places of separation into the places of despair in our neighbors lives and in the life of our world are we willing to listen and then to speak prophetically to a world that is in deep need of it to speak radical prophetic words of inclusion to speak radical words of peace are we willing to take measurable steps to prophesy to all the dead places in our world and then are we willing to trust that the words will not be enough and instead we will need the spirit of god to

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come from every corner of this world and to fall upon those dead places to bring new life here's what i think our invitation is as we explore what it means to take deep breaths in i think our invitation is to pay attention to our breathing this week when you go home from this place maybe even as you're seated right now are you breathing just a little and calling it a life i invite us as individuals but also communally to take a deep breath in of god's mercy and then to breathe it out to every person you meet this week to share the mercies of god with every person whose eyes you look into this week and i wonder i wonder if your presence and your breath of mercy and love might enliven them again

scripture tells us that we will know that the lord is god when god opens the graves and brings us up from them and when god puts god's spirit within us that we might live as we discern what it means to be the body let us be ever attentive to the holy and sacred act of deep breathing born of ruach and loosen the world invite you to join me in a word of prayer

good and gracious spirit if you were drawn by the prophet's words from each corner of this world we pray that you would draw once again here

we pray that you would fall fresh upon the places in our lives that are disconnected whether it's our connection to our church or our faith life to our family or to the calling that you have placed in our lives for our work whether it's into a friendship or our parenting we pray lord that you'll breathe life into those places by your ruach

not only that lord but we pray that you would enliven your church once again that we might claim the power to prophesy to speak prophetically in the ways that you're calling idlewild presbyterian church to be prophetic to do that not only through our preaching and our teaching but most especially through our advocacy are showing up to be the body of christ to one another help us to take deep breaths of your spirit this week oh god it helps to breathe in your mercy and to breathe it out to everyone we meet in the name of the father and the son and the holy spirit