

Come and See 2025

Week 5: The Breath of God

There are two experiences in life which make me question more deeply than any other what it means to be human, what it means to live. For most of us, these experiences are very rare. The first is to be present when a child is born and takes his or her first breath. The second is to be there when someone dies, when their breath is stilled.

I was present when each of my four children was born. Each was a powerful and emotional experience. No birth is without its difficulties and pain and risk for the mother or the child. But there is that wonderful moment when the baby has been born and the midwife clears the airways and baby takes his or her very first breath. Often they begin to cry at the top of their lungs, taking in all of these new sensations.

Life begins of course, before birth, but that taking of that first breath is a vital step, the lungs fill with air and baby becomes a person in their own right, just before the cord is cut and then they are laid in their mothers arms to be surrounded with love and care. Where does this new life, this person, come from? What does it mean?

The second moment is of course at the end of life, when we keep watch and sit with a loved one in their final hours. Every death, like every life is different, but here too there is a sense of being on holy ground. Breathing will often be laboured at the very end of life. Sometimes all you can hear in the room is the breath entering and leaving the person's lungs.

And then comes the end: a great stillness and softness and silence. One moment you are sitting with a person: someone who has loved and laughed and wept. The next moment, the breathing is stilled. The person is no longer there. You are sitting with their physical remains, a body from which the life, the breath has gone. There is a deep mystery here in our beginning and in our ending which draws us deeper still: what is the meaning of this gift of life. What does it mean to be a human person? What does it mean to live well?

As we have seen, we are made and fashioned from earth. God invites men and women of dust to be washed and made clean from the inside out. We die to ourselves and rise again to new life in the waters of baptism. Jesus promises to us the gift of the Spirit, like a spring of living water, bringing new life to the desert within and the desert of our world.

But there are two more powerful pictures of the Holy Spirit to explore: the mighty wind and the tongues of fire which marked the Day of Pentecost. Some of the great hymns to the Spirit use this image of the Spirit as God's breath. You may know them:

Breathe on me breath of God, fill me with life anew

That I may love the way you love

And do what you would do.

So what does it mean to be filled with the Spirit, with the very breath of God? The prophet Ezekiel has another powerful image for us.

Ezekiel is called to preach to a people who are worn down by tragedy, who are living in exile far from home, whose hope has died. In Ezekiel 37, the prophet is taken in a vision to a valley full of dry bones, bleached white by the sun.

The Lord shows Ezekiel the dry bones: there were very many and they were very dry. The Lord tells Ezekiel to prophesy – to preach to these dry bones. He begins to speak and suddenly there is a noise and a rattling in the valley.

... and the bones came together, bone to its bones. I looked and behold there were sinews on them and flesh and skin had covered them (Ezekiel 37.8).

The process of death has been reversed. You can hear the awe in his words. Ezekiel is now in a valley full of not bones but of lifeless bodies. *But*, says the prophet, *There was no breath in them.*

Then Ezekiel receives a further command:

Prophesy to the breath, prophesy mortal and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God, Come from the four winds, O breath and breath upon these slain that they might live". I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude (Ezekiel 37.10).

Ezekiel's prophecy rekindles hope. The power of Almighty God is such that God can bring resurrection and raise up a new people even from a valley of dry bones.

But the prophecy is also a profound reflection on what it means to be human from a prophet who has seen his share of new life and death. At the very core of

Ezekiel's vision is a simple truth: life is more than physical. A human person is more than bones and sinews and skin and tissue. There is some indefinable, indescribable quality to what makes us human and gives us life and agency and personality. That indescribable quality, this essence of life is what Ezekiel describes here as breath and the very breath of God.

Ezekiel is drawing on a deep biblical tradition here. To understand it we need to know that the same word in the Hebrew language is used for three different things. The Hebrew word is ruach (pronounced roo-ackh). Ruach means wind; ruach means breath and ruach means spirit. You can see the interplay between these three meanings in Ezekiel's vision. Ezekiel is told to prophecy to the wind, to call the breath to come, to give new spirit to the host in the valley. Spirit, wind and breath are one and the same word.

Come back with me to the early chapters of Genesis, those chapters which are so powerful for understanding what it means to be alive. In the very first verses of Genesis we meet this word, ruach.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters....(Genesis 1.2)

The word translated wind here is *ruach*. This is the very breath of God, the Spirit of God. The old King James version translates the Hebrew in this way:

And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters (Genesis 1.2 AV)

God is brooding over the chaos, before the great acts of creation, each of which begin, and God said.

In the second creation account, as we have seen, the man is fashioned from the dust of the ground but as in Ezekiel there is a vital second part to the mystery of life:

God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being (Genesis 2.7)

This is the more ordinary word for breath, for breathing, for man's inner life and spirit. The same word, nephesh, is used of the life and breath given to animals and birds and reptiles in Genesis 1.30:

... everything that has the breath of life... (Genesis 1.30)

When Ezekiel is prophesying in the vision of the valley of dry bones. Ezekiel is speaking about more than the dead being brought back to their old life, the life they share with all creation. Ezekiel speaks of a time when the very breath of God, the Spirit of the living God, will be given to humankind, not just extending our lives or reversing death but raising us up to share the life of God and the life of all eternity.

So come with me now from the valley of dry bones, from the vision of creation, to the Upper Room on Easter Day. Jesus appears to his disciples. Notice the very breath of God.

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 (John 20.22)

Jesus bestows on his disciples in this gentle act the very breath of God, the wind of God, the life-giving Spirit of God to bring a radical new life in the Spirit. Jesus has spoken in John 14 and 16 of the way in which God himself will come and dwell in the heart and life of the believer through the gift of the Spirit, the breath of God dwelling deeply within us. The Spirit will be our teacher; the Spirit will be our friend and companion; the Spirit will bring a peace which passes understanding; joy in the midst of sorrow, strength in times of trial; guidance when we are perplexed. The gift of the Spirit is the breath of God, filling the hearts and minds of the believer.

This is what we pray for in services of baptism and confirmation, that the very breath of God, the Holy Spirit, will make his home in the life of every Christian and that every Christian's life will be joined to the life of God, deeply, now and for all eternity. This is what we celebrate in the words of the Peace at a baptism service, which quote from Ephesians 1:

*God has made us one in Christ
He has set his seal upon us
and as a pledge of what is to come
has given the Spirit to dwell in our hearts.*

Human beings are made from dust. But God invites us to be washed and made new in the waters of baptism. God sets within us a spring of living water. God

breathes his very life, his Spirit into the very depth of our being to bring new life to all we seek to do.

And there is still more: God promises to set our hearts on fire with love.

Come and see.