

Pray Without Ceasing

First Presbyterian Church, McAllen
Week of March 23 - March 29, 2020

O people, hope in the Lord.

With the Lord there is steadfast love and great power to redeem.

Psalm 130:7

A note from Rev. Kathryn Escandell, pastor of FPC McAllen:

With the implementation of a “Shelter at Home” order for Hidalgo County, FPC McAllen continues to refrain from gathering in for worship. My prayer is that even during this time spent apart in body, we will continue to be deeply connected in spirit to one another and to our Lord.

These pages offer an alternative worship experience based on the lectionary Scriptures for March 29. The texts from Ezekiel and from John are printed in the packet, with an activity for each. Use them in whatever way you find helpful. Please feel free to read one or both; to engage in one or both of the response activities; to complete this worship experience all at once or in multiple sittings during the week.

I pray that these words, images, and ideas will open for you a path toward the peace and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Lectionary texts for March 29 are:

Ezekiel 37: 1-14

Psalm 130

Romans 8: 6-11

John 11: 1-45

Call to Worship



Thus says the Lord:

“I will put my breath within you, and you shall live.”

In gratitude, we praise the Giver of Life.

Jesus says: “I am the resurrection and the life.”

In gratitude, we praise the Source of our Being.

We worship the One who frees us from the grave and stirs dry bones to life.

Spirit, be with us this day!

Call to Confession

Each week, as a part of our worship, we acknowledge our need for God's mercy as we join together in a Prayer of Confession. We are bold to come before God with our confession for we trust in God's steadfast mercy, which is deeper than the ocean, wider than the skies, stronger than the mountains. It is everlasting and yet new every morning.

Therefore, let us pray.

Prayer of Confession

O Lord, if you held our sin against us,
who could live, who could stand?

We seem to have more faith in death than hope in your promise of life.

We seek peace through war and find security in weapons.

We abandon the hungry, sick, and dying, and pursue wealth by making others poor.

And even so, you love us;
still there is forgiveness with you!

Therefore, we worship you;
for you alone, O Lord, can save us from death
and redeem us from our sin. Amen.

Words of Assurance

God of earth, air, fire, and water, we surrender to you our old humanity.

Christ, we would rise with you:

We would be born anew.

Christ has died. Christ is risen.

We are forgiven. We too may leave the grave.

A Prayer for Illumination

O Lord, we wait for you, and in your Word we trust.

May the power of your Spirit breathe upon us,

and set our hearts and minds
on the source of life and peace:

Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.



A Reading from the Prophets

Ezekiel 37: 1-14

(Note: “YHWH” refers to God and may be read as either “Yahweh” or “the Lord”)

The hand of YHWH was upon me, and it carried me away by the Spirit of YHWH and set me down in a valley – a valley full of bones. ² God made me walk up and down among them. And I saw that there was a vast number of bones lying there in the valley, and they were very dry. ³ God asked me, “Mere mortal, can these bones live?”

I answered, “Only you know that, Sovereign Yhwh.”

⁴ And God said, “Prophecy to these bones and say to them: ‘Dry bones, hear the word of YHWH! ⁵ Sovereign YHWH says to these bones: I am going to breathe life into you. ⁶ I will fasten sinews on you, clothe you with flesh, cover you with skin, and give you breath. And you will live; and you will know that I am Sovereign YHWH.’”

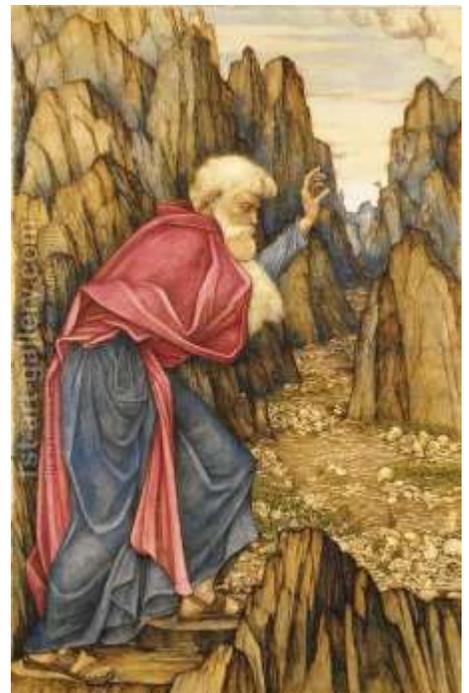
⁷ So I prophesied as I was commanded, and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and all the bones came together, bone to matching bone. ⁸ As I watched, sinews appeared on them, flesh clothed them, and skin covered them. But there was no breath in them.

⁹ Then God said to me, “Prophecy to the wind; prophecy, mere mortal, and say to it: ‘Thus says Sovereign YHWH: Approach from the four winds, Breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.’”

¹⁰ I prophesied as I was commanded, and breath came into them; they came alive, and stood up on their feet – a vast multitude.

¹¹ Then God said to me, “Mere mortal, these bones are the whole House of Israel. The people keep saying, ‘Our bones are dry, our hope is gone, and we are doomed.’ ¹²

Prophecy, therefore, and say to them, ‘Thus says Sovereign YHWH: I am going to open your graves and raise you up from the dead, my people. I will return you to the land of Israel. ¹³ When I open your graves and raise you up, you, my people, will know that I am YHWH. ¹⁴ Then I will put my Spirit into you and you will return to life, and I will settle you back on your own land. Then you will know that I, YHWH, have spoken and made all this happen, says Sovereign YHWH.’”



A Reflection about Breath in a Time of Respiratory Disease

Breath is much on our minds these days as we hear daily alarming reports of the novel coronavirus and the illness it causes – an illness which robs people of their ability to breath freely, deeply.

We think about the steps we are taking to try to keep ourselves and others safe from this disease. We consider what we are individually and collectively doing to protect our life-sustaining breath – careful handwashing; extensive disinfecting of surfaces; increasingly restrictive physical distancing measures. These good and important practices remind us simultaneously that human life is vulnerable in the face of powerful pathogens and that the human spirit has the capacity and the desire to thrive and to serve even in the midst of challenge.

Our verses from Ezekiel tell of God’s holy promise to the despairing people of Israel, a people depicted as a valley of dead, dry, scattered bones: *I am going to breathe life into you ... I will give you breath. And you will live; and you will know that I am the LORD.* In our current moment, we treasure anew the gift of breath; we hold a new appreciation for the miracle of drawing air deep into our lungs. So God’s promise to give breath is welcome. In the vision which Ezekiel recounts, the promise is given to the bones of people long dead. As students of the Enlightenment, we know that skeletons cannot be reanimated; those who have decayed into scattered bones will not return to the land of living humanity. And yet in Ezekiel’s vision, they do. God’s promise is fulfilled. The dry bones of long-dead people reconnect, resume human form, and are filled with breath which brings new life.

Breath is a physical function of our bodies; a physical function which to which we are more attentive in the current coronavirus pandemic. Can we place a spiritual understanding of breath alongside the bodily understanding? Can we ponder the ways in which God brings the gift of breath into our lives through the presence and the movement of the Holy Spirit? Can we sit for a moment in gratitude for the life-giving force which breathes into our spirits through: a kind word from a friend; through the deep pleasure of serving others well; through shared laughter or shared tears; through the joy of loving companionship – even when such companionship occurs from a distance. Just as we are taking careful steps to preserve and protect our physical breath these days, so may we preserve and protect our spiritual breath and the spiritual breath of our fellow humans. We can do that by reaching out with calls and notes and texts. By holding one another in prayer. By spending time each day engaged in some practice or process that lifts our spirits toward hope. By being tender with

ourselves and with one another. By trusting in God and by knowing that we remain in the steadfast eternal care of the Sovereign God.

Ezekiel’s vision concludes with these words from the Lord:

I will put my Spirit into you and you will return to life, and I will settle you back on your own land. Then you will know that I, YHWH, have spoken and made all this happen, says Sovereign YHWH.”

God is not negotiating a transaction here: **I’ll do this and then you’ll do that.**

We should read these words instead as a statement of truth: **God will act as God acts – which is to give life. The natural outflow from God’s act is that we who receive life recognize its source and live in grateful response.** This is not transaction, but covenantal relationship.

May we – this day and always -- give thanks to the Sovereign God who give us breath that we might live. Amen.

Zuni Chant

Beseeking the breath of the divine one,	
His life-giving breath,	His breath of old age,
His breath of waters,	His breath of seeds,
His breath of riches,	His breath of fecundity,
His breath of power,	His breath of good fortune,
Asking for his breath	And into my warm body drawing his breath,
I add to your breath	That happily you may always live.



Hymn

Breathe on Me, Breath of God

Sing this hymn or speak it, silently or aloud. Let its words awaken in you a readiness to feel and respond to God’s breath moving within you.

*Breathe on me, Breath of God; fill me with life anew;
That I may love what thou dost love, and do what thou wouldst do.*

*Breathe on me, Breath of God, until my heart is pure,
Until with thee I will one will, to do and to endure.*

*Breathe on me, Breath of God, till I am wholly thine,
Until this earthly part of me glows with thy fire divine.*

*Breathe on me, Breath of God, so shall I never die,
But live with thee the perfect life of thine eternity.*

A Reading from the Gospels

John 11: 1-45

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³ So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴ But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." ⁵ Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶ after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. ⁷ Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸ The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" ⁹ Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰ But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." ¹¹ After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." ¹² The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ¹³ Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵ For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶ Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." ¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." ²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." ²⁸ When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." ²⁹ And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³² When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴ He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵ Jesus began to weep. ³⁶ So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷ But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" ³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹ Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because

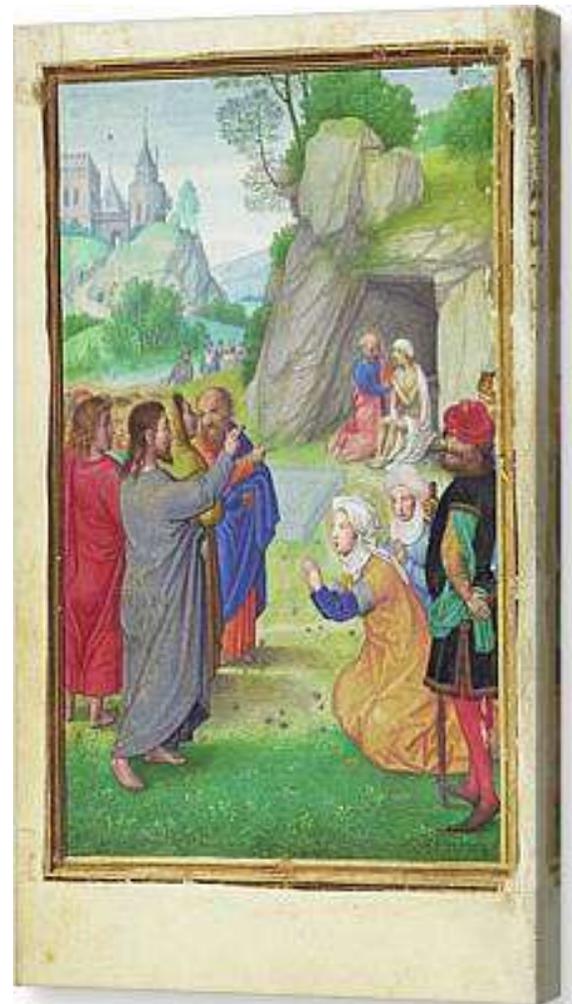
he has been dead four days.”⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me.”⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.”⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”⁴⁵ Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

The Word of the Lord / Thanks be to God

Response to the Word

Select an image below or on the next page of the Raising of Lazarus. Sit with the image long enough to let it deepen your connection to this story in John’s Gospel. If it is helpful, use these questions to guide your contemplation of the image.

- Where do you place yourself in this story? With the disciples? Mary? Martha? The crowd of mourners? Lazarus?
- Whose death have you wept over, grieved deeply? Where did you find comfort for your grief?
- Are there places in your life that need to be unbound?





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Prayers of Intercession

Out of the depths we cry to you, O Lord.

Lord, hear our voices and be attentive to our prayers.

**We pray for those whose hope is lost, who feel dried up and cut off from you.
By your grace, open their graves; bring them back to the land of the living.**

**We pray for those who are oppressed, held captive by powers of death.
Release them from their chains; unbind them and let them go!**

**We pray for those who weep, lost and lifeless in fear and regret.
Grant them the peace of your presence; show them what your love can do.**

**We pray for those who are dying, the light of life fading in their eyes.
Help them to know the assurance of your lovingkindness.**

**We thank you, O Lord, that you hear our prayers.
Enable us to trust in you, and thus to see your glory;
through Jesus Christ, the resurrection and the life,
who taught us to pray with these words:**

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread;

and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil;

for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.



Blessing

May the Lord Jesus Christ,
who is the resurrection and the life,
bless and keep you in this life,
and in the life to come.
Amen.