

Prophecy to the breath (Ezekiel 37:1-14) Lent 5A

We practice our faith in the season of Lent so that we know what to do when things get harder.

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Ever since my first call in Berkeley, California, I've practiced yoga. I'm no aficionado, but I can complete a whole sun-salutation without direction and can recognize some Sanskrit shorthand. And, of course, I know about the importance of breathing.

Or rather, to be quite honest, I know the importance of giving lip service to breathing. Every yoga teacher I have ever had has said something about how breathing is the most important part of yoga. Some suggested they could offer a whole class on the breath, just sitting on a mat. But I never met a teacher who dared to actually do it—until I went to India.

Last fall my family traveled to India, where my husband's cousin invited me to her yoga class. I was interested to see how yoga is taught in the land of its origins. Would I finally learn the secrets of the handstand? Perfect my mountain pose? Be shamed by my insufficient cat/cow? We would have a full 90 minutes of instruction, so anything seemed possible.

In the crowded, un-air-conditioned room—in India, hot yoga is just yoga—we prepared our mats and bolsters. Our teacher explained we would do just three poses that day, all lying on the floor, because we were going to focus on the breath. I wondered what I had gotten myself into.

Ezekiel must have had similar reservations. When the Book of Ezekiel opens, the prophet is in exile in Babylon and the city of Jerusalem under siege. Though Ezekiel named God's judgment against the Hebrew people, it still must have come as a shock when Jerusalem fell and the temple was destroyed. It's one thing to prophesy destruction and another to see it accomplished. Ezekiel must have wondered what God would do now.

And then he has a vision of a valley filled with dry bones.

Ezekiel's vision operates on both a literal and metaphorical level. Years of exile and war have taken their toll. The people have been killed, their city ruined. A valley filled with bones is not an exaggeration.

But perhaps equally relevant is their spiritual wasting. Centuries of idolatry and sin have left the people with lifeless, hardened hearts. They have worshiped foreign gods and perpetuated acts of injustice against their neighbors. When God asks Ezekiel if these bones can live, the answer seems to be a clear no. But Ezekiel holds out a sliver of hope. God may know a way.

God, who created human beings from the dust of the earth, pledges to recreate the Hebrew people. Ezekiel's prophecy starts the process. The bodies come together, hip bones connected to thigh bones and so forth, but there's a hitch. Despite Ezekiel's words, there is no life in these newly restored bodies.

They need to breathe.

In the yoga class we took our places. We lay on our backs, or sides, or even slightly inverted on a bolster. We breathed in through our noses and out through our mouths, or the other way around. First we filled our lungs or our abdomens or backs, and then we exhaled in similarly various ways. It was strange, focusing so completely on a normally automatic process, and oddly meditative. Concentrating on the breath made it easy to clear the mind and just be.

At the class's conclusion, the teacher had us gather around. She reminded us that while someone can breathe for you for a short time, ultimately each of us has to breathe for ourselves. We had practiced our breath in easy postures so that we would remember what to do when poses were harder. The feeling of the breath was important. If we could remember what breathing meditatively felt like, we might be able to do it again, even outside of class. This class was just a beginning, she

reminded us. It would be up to us to take its benefits further.

God commands Ezekiel to prophesy to the breath. The dry bones, reconstituted as bodies, get a kick-start—divine CPR from the four winds, filling them up and making them live. But they don't seem to do much else, at least not yet. Ezekiel's vision ends with a vast multitude of living bodies, standing in that valley, waiting. God promises to put God's spirit within them, to set the people on their own soil, to make them know that God is their God. But how will they respond?

Christians have long used the season of Lent to engage in devotional practices. We fast, give alms, pray, worship, study, and do acts of service throughout the 40 days. Ideally these are automatic habits for people of faith, but we sometimes forget. As I learned in yoga class, intentionally engaging in even rudimentary practices can restore us. We practice our faith in the season of Lent so that we know what to do when things get harder. The discipline of the season prepares us for experiencing suffering, loss, and even death. Activities conducted in the sheltered context of our homes, small groups, and churches ready us to work in a sometimes hostile and ruined world. Our faith practices become a bolster, lifting us up, helping us hold our posture and even stand in the face of that which could destroy us.

But, of course, the next steps are up to us. As Lent comes to an end and Holy Week begins, we must choose to apply what we have learned. Will we just give our faith lip service, or will we live it? Will we turn away from idolatry, worshiping God alone? Will we engage in acts of justice, coming to our neighbor's aid? Or will we fall back into old habits and unhealthy postures? Will we waste away, losing our sense of connection and continuity?

When it all seems like too much, we must remember: God will not abandon us. Life can come even in the dry places. We don't need to be aficionados. We already know what to do.

It starts with simply breathing.