

January 28 – Awake, Receive the Breath of (New) Life
Ezekiel 37:1-14; 1 Peter 1:3-4

A relatively young man had been critically injured in a motorcycle accident. Initially there was doubt that he would survive. If he did survive, he would be paralyzed for life. Well, the young man did survive. In an interview a few years later, this young man described his excitement about life, a life he now lives paralyzed. I was struck by one statement he made in that interview: he said that even when critically injured, he came to believe our bodies are designed to seek life, to not give up. He believes he is alive because that is the default setting for our bodies.

Dr. Julie Silver affirms that belief, at least the basics of the belief, that our bodies are “wired to live.” “Each of us possesses a surprising capacity to bounce back from illness and injury, under the right conditions... Dr. Silver speaks not only as a specialist in physical medicine and rehabilitation but also is a cancer survivor.

If our physical bodies seem to be wired to live, even in the darkest of times and circumstances, does this apply to churches also? Are churches, as the body of Christ, “wired” to live? Many congregations throughout the US are asking this question as they dwindle in size year after year. Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones seems all too real for these congregations. God’s question to Ezekiel is our question to God: can these bones live? Can this church live?

As I was preparing this message, a hymn came to mind, one we could have sung this morning: Breathe on me, breath of God. Fill me with life anew. That I may love the way you, God, love and do what you would do.

How can we be filled with life anew: as individuals and as a congregation? Let’s look back to Ezekiel 37.

The Israelites had been invaded more than once in their lifetimes. Now King Nebuchadnezzar and his army from Babylon had invaded and besieged Jerusalem. Many had been killed in the invasion. And most of those not killed were taken into 1

exile, taken off to Babylon. Few Israelites were left in and around Jerusalem to carry on with life. The valley of dry bones was a visual reminder of all this death and destruction. Those in exile, in Babylon, where Ezekiel lived, were in despair, as Ezekiel records in these verses: “our bones are dried up; our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.” Those in exile in Babylon had given up; they believed they had no future. As Ezekiel surveyed all these very dry bones scattered and piled throughout the valley, God asked the question that probably was on Ezekiel’s mind: “Is it possible for a dead people to become alive again?”

Is it possible there is more to our understanding of this life God has given each of us I’ve already suggested we are “wired” to live. As Ezekiel watched, the dry bones joined together, then were covered with muscle and flesh and finally covered with skin. The bodies could move, and appeared alive. We may appear to be alive and be able to move. But like the bodies Ezekiel saw, do we lack breath? God’s breath? The spirit of life that comes only from God? Do we have life for the here and now, as well as for eternity?

Ezekiel writes, “Hear the Word of the Lord.” This is where we have to begin: what is God telling us? How is God speaking to us? We listen for God’s voice, then renewal can begin. “Thus says the Lord God to these bones: ‘Behold, I will cause breath and spirit to enter you, and you shall live.’” We hear the word of the Lord; the Lord offers the breath of life so we can live. Notice, God also tells us why we are offered life: “So you shall realize I am the Lord.” Our lives are to be focused on God, honoring the Lord God for who God is.

Our focus is on God, we hear the Word of the Lord, now renewal can begin. Ezekiel describes two stages in this renewal .-

Stage 1 – Awake – wake up, get moving

Ezekiel watches as the bones come together, as sinews (tendons) connected the bones together, as flesh covers the bones and then as skin covers the flesh. He can recognize all those bones as bodies, human bodies! “But there was no breath or life in them.” Bodies but no life. Maybe that’s how we might 2

describe our own lives when we feel we are just “going through the motions” of life, but without energy, vitality, excitement
 Stage 2 – Receive the Breath of (New) Life, be transformed
 God said to Ezekiel: “O breath, breathe on these slain that they may live.’ “I did as God commanded and the breath came into them and they lived.”

This wasn’t the first time God’s breath had given life. Look way back to the beginning of the Israelites’ story, to the beginning of the Old Testament. In Genesis 2:7 we read that God created man, created humans, and then God breathed into the nostrils, God breathed the spirit of life into His created being

God gives us life—how do we live it?

This morning, YOU are a participant in this message. I want you to take time to think of your own life in Christ and Christ’s life in you. The best way to describe my relationship with Christ is:

Dry, disconnected bones	Bodies, but no breath or spirit	God-breathed life
5	4	3
		2
		1

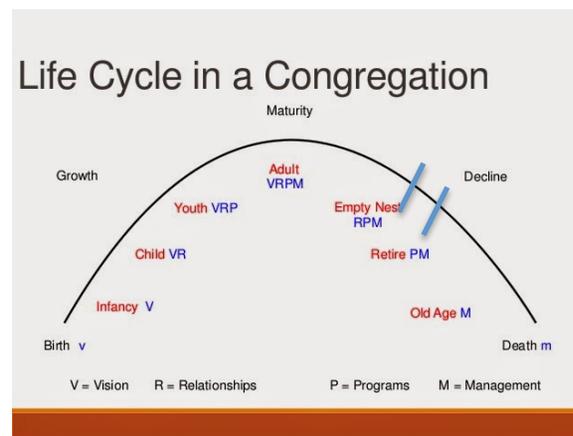


I’m asking you to consider your relationship with God. After some reflection, place an “X” on the arrow showing how “alive in Christ” you believe you are. Next, take a few moments to pray silently. After your silent prayer, write down one thing that needs to happen to move you from where you have placed your X to the next stage toward a God-breathed life. Let’s each of us be silent as we wait on God.

Awake, receive the breath of (new) life...

Recently Church Council was asked to consider what FBC might look like in the next few years. Do we believe this church is “wired to live” and, if so, what will that life look like in the years to come?

Some people who have studied churches have concluded there is a church life cycle, like there is a human life cycle. The diagram follows:



From all the churches studied, there appears to be a point on this diagram at which a congregation has to make a significant decision. That point is marked by the two lines on the “Decline” side of the diagram. At this point, according to those who have studied churches, the church has to make one of two choices: (1) continue decline until the church closes or (2) reinvent itself. (1) Keep on keeping on with the way we’ve always done things – perhaps like the bodies going through the motions – or (2) receive God’s Spirit, God’s breath of new life. Reinventing the church may sound scary, risky, uncomfortable. And we may ask, “Is THAT really necessary?” Well, how we worship God in 2018 and future years may need to be very different from the church of 1998 or 1968 or 1958 or 1870.... Last Tuesday I sat through a webinar presenting information on GenZ, those born from 1999 through 2015. This generation is very different from previous generations, even from those just one generation older. They’re described as “screenagers,” spending several hours each day on cell phones, computers, tablets. They tend to believe that truth is relative—your truth may not be my truth; that there is no absolute Truth (such as God’s Truth). It was an enlightening but sobering discussion. Life is different in 2018 than it was when everyone went to church in the 1950s and 1960s. Yes, the need for the breath of God’s Spirit exists among all of us, but fewer of 4

us recognize that need. Habakkuk 3:2 could be our plea to again be God’s messengers in Traverse City. Habakkuk says, “O Lord, I have heard of your fame, and I stand in awe, O Lord, of your work. In our own time revive it, in our own time make it known...”

It’s time again for your participation. Now it is time to think about First Baptist, or the church you attend.

The best way to describe my church’s relationship with Christ is:

Dry, disconnected bones		Bodies, but no breath or spirit		God-breathed life
5	4	3	2	1



- 1) Place an “X” on the arrow at the spot that best describes how you see your church’s life with and in God
- 2) Spend some time in prayer
- 3) What one thing do you think needs to happen for your church to move closer to a God-breathed life.

(In the sermon as delivered Sunday, there was reference to an additional insert in the bulletin. Two questions on that insert asked people to consider the future of their church and to describe what it might look like in three years. The point is to describe what renewal would look like.)

God asked Ezekiel, “Can these bones live?” And Ezekiel replied, “YOU know, O God.” These bones can live again, when we are open to awaking and receiving God’s breath of life.

We can have renewed life for we have hope.

We have hope as we seek God’s guidance

Proverbs 1:1-7 tells us to seek wisdom, to be open to God’s instruction.

We sang about renewal this morning, renewal made possible through Christ:

- Teach us Your Word
- Teach us to pray
- Teach us to love, everyone

We have hope through Jesus Christ

As we read in 1 Peter 1:3-4, when we become Christ-followers, we are born again to a living hope.

We have hope for we are not on our own:

Not by might or by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord Zechariah 4:6

We have hope as we seek God’s guidance, hope through Jesus Christ, hope for we are not left on our own.

Are we ready to live? To receive the breath of new life in our relationship with God?

Is your church ready to live? Is your church ready to receive the breath of new life in our relationship with God. We have a choice.

(Note: The sermon as delivered refers to First Baptist Church. However, every church engaged in vital ministry of the Good News needs God’s breath of life. We all can reflect of our relationship with Christ.)

