

Breathe in us, breath of God

A sermon preached at St. Brendan Parish, Deer Isle, Maine, on the 5th Sunday in Lent, March 22, 2026, by the Rev. Dr. Jenny Reece

Texts: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

Prayer: Breathe in us, breath of God, fill us with life anew, that we may speak and hear your word, and do what you would do. And so may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be blessed by you, our Rock, our water in this wilderness, and our Redeemer. Amen.

I'm so glad that "Breathe on me, breath of God" was chosen for our sequence hymn today. It's a lovely hymn, and so perfect as a bridge between the two amazing stories we have heard today, the story of Ezekiel and the dry bones, and the story of Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead.

But I would change one word in the hymn. "Breathe On Me" conveys the idea that God is up there somewhere, and blowing down the Holy Spirit upon us individually from outside, like a dove descending or like flames appearing on our head or a mighty wind blowing over us—all great images of the power of the Holy Spirit. But I would like to suggest that the breath of God, the life-giving spirit of God, does not come upon us from the outside but rather arises in us from inside, from deep inside. Out of the depths, as the Psalmist says.

So: Not breathe ON me, breath of God. But Breathe IN me, breath of God.

One of the great gifts of the ministry of this parish of St Brendan's is that you already have taken to heart the ministry of the inner breathing of the Holy Spirit. Many of you come to the Monday and Wednesday opportunities for contemplative or centering prayer, and some also attend the session I offer on Fridays. More of you, I hope, have a faithful prayer practice in your home. Those who do, know the benefits. They know that they have been changed. Mourners have been comforted, the anxious have found true peace, the fearful have discovered their courage, and even the terminally scatterbrained like

myself have been able to find new stability, new focus. New life. This has happened, slowly almost imperceptibly, over a long course of time in which the habit of prayer has taken root: sitting (or standing, or kneeling or walking) day by day, alone or with others, in silence, or speaking, just breathing, or focusing perhaps on some word of Scripture, lifting up and giving away to God all needs, desires, concerns for ourselves, our loved ones, for strangers, for our world. In this way they—you—I-- have become aware that even if we pray alone we are part of a community of prayer, even if that community is accessed by the miracle of technology. As we breathe together, we are aware of the possibility of new life. So there's another thing I would change in the hymn:

Not breathe in me: breathe in us, breath of God.

Both our scripture stories today are about how the powerful life-giving spirit of God is given to us, yes, each individually, but not for our sake alone. The Holy Spirit is given to build community. Those dry bones of Ezekiel's story—they are a people defeated, a people who have lost everything, a people whose great hopes and plans for themselves as a great nation, the envy of all the world, have suddenly come crashing down in a great defeat and have turned to dust.

But there is great hope in this story isn't there. We are reminded that it is from the dust that God makes us. God gathers the dust and bones of our defeat and loss and breathes into it, breathes in it until it has new life. The community is restored: "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.

And the Lazarus story, as much as it is about the power of the Holy Spirit, as manifested in Jesus Christ, to raise one man from the dead, is also about the way that power gives new life to people in their relationships with each other, to people making a community.

This is a very relational story. On one level it's about Jesus intimate relationships with his close friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus, sisters and brother, and all of them loved by Jesus and loving him. Their shared concern and grief over the illness and death of Lazarus is movingly portrayed. Their love and grief has various expressions, including the outbursts of the sisters to Jesus whom they want to blame somehow for not being there to stop the inevitable. Grief does that doesn't it—we want to blame someone and often turn on ourselves or on the caregivers—if only I had done this, if only you had done that. And through those shared eruptions of grief the sisters elicit from Jesus one of his clearest expressions of who he is and what his mission is. I am the resurrection and the life.

But there's another level of community in this story beyond that of family and intimate friendship. There are constant references in the story to the Judeans who are congregating at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, who are gathering to watch and to comment on Jesus—and not necessarily with good intent. What Jesus does in this story is walk into great danger. By going to the village where his friends live, which is just 2 miles outside Jerusalem, Jesus, who has just been threatened with stoning is walking into the lion's den. His disciples want him to stay safe and stay away from Jerusalem. But love compels Jesus to do the dangerous thing to risk his life and safety for his friends. To lay down his life for his friends. During the course of his raising of Lazarus, we can see that the Judeans, originally hostile to him, are moved by Jesus' honest and open expressions of his own feeling, he prays openly, weeps openly, and his honesty and transparency begins to convert the divided community into one that is whole and bound together around the death of Lazarus and his extraordinary rising into new life.

That new life, they begin to see, can be theirs,

That new life, we begin to see, can be ours.

How do we grasp it, how do we live it?

We pray. We breathe.

I don't suggest that it's our practice of contemplative prayer is the cause of the new life. The new life comes from God, and is given to us through Christ who stands at the door of our self-inflicted tombs of need, guilt, and greed, calling us to come out. It is Christ who can peel off the bonds and bandages that our hurts and our hurtful human cultures have placed around our spirits. Our prayer practice is only one way of opening the door to the breath of the Spirit.

We live in a culture that emphasizes the importance of outward things—money, careers, fashions, status, military power—but what is really important is what is inside. A revolutionary thing to do in this culture is to pay attention to your own depths, to what is happening in you. You can't do that if you don't stop at some point in your day and take a time to contemplate, to breathe, to pray.

When you do, you find how large a space is down in there. How vast a community you can connect with in the silence in your room alone. I always loved the image—if you don't mind a rather silly analogy from the old British sci-fi series Dr. Who. The time-traveling doctor voyages in a machine that looks like a London phone booth. But when you open the door, you are amazed by how the inside is far bigger than the outside.

We are each a Tardis. Resisting the authoritarian and militaristic and earth destroying evils of our time starts in paying attention to our own depths, where God has planted the seeds of a new life for us individually and as a community, where God wants to breathe in us. Open the door. Breathe,

Breathe in us, breath of God.

Amen.