

THE BREATH THAT GIVES LIFE

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Joan Peymann Funeral; August 29, 2020

I've been told that the Fall harvest will be early this year. In years gone by, Joan would have by now already gathered with her family "up north" for their annual fishing trip where she would have been in her glory cooking and baking for her family. That was something she loved to do. It was her warm-up act for what came later in the Fall: feeding the crew at harvest time. Of course, harvest is not the only time a farm wife and mother is busy.

Pastors get razed as having cushy jobs: we get paid a full-time salary for working half a day one day a week. But there's also the joke about famers: "You know why farmers drive 4X4s? They work four weeks in the spring and four weeks in the Fall" – which, of course, is not at all true. Working on the traditional family farm, Joan worked right alongside Harold in the barn milking, driving the tractor and grain truck, filling the corn crib, shelling corn, and walking or riding beans. And when the men and farm children – I don't think any of you were in the house watching TV while this was going on – came in from filling the silo or putting up hay, Joan had lots of food and drink prepared for the lunches.

It must have been difficult for Joan these last years as her struggles with breathing prevented her from doing the hard work she had always done, the hard work she loved doing. It became hard for her to get in and out of church, too. But she and Duane remained a fixture sitting side-by-side in church. She didn't like having to drag her oxygen concentrator with her wherever she went, but it meant she could get out of the house and to church.

The last time I saw her was just two weeks before she died – pastors still are not allowed to visit members in the hospital. I saw her and Duane coming up the sidewalk into church for the Saturday service. She made it up the church steps and spoke to me about sitting up front because it was a Communion service for them – otherwise they would have saved the long walk and sat in the back. I'm sad that I did not get to say goodbye to her, but it is a great comfort that the last time we were together in this life was in God's house to hear His Word and receive the Sacrament.

Even though Joan led a full life, and I don't want to diminish anything that came before these last few years, it is the image of her in church with her oxygen concentrator helping her breath a little better that I want to focus on today. And I have chosen to preach on what might be considered an odd Scripture text from Ezekiel 37. The Old Testament Prophet Ezekiel was given a vision from God of a valley of dry, dead bones, and asked by God, "**Can these bones live?**" That's a question we need the answer to today. "Can the dry ashes of Joan's body and bones live?"

Maybe the most obvious sign of life in a body is that it is still breathing. When our bodies cease to breath, death comes shortly afterwards. Joan was able to live as long as she could still breathe, and then she stopped breathing and died.

When God created Adam and Eve in the beginning, their bodies were just a lump of dirt until God breathed His Spirit into them. The Old Testament Hebrew word for "Spirit" and "breath" is the same, which is also true of the New Testament Greek. Every physical breath of air we take in to live is a reminder that we need the Holy Spirit in our spirits, or souls, in order to have life. A physical body without a spirit is just as dead as a body that no longer breathes. God created our bodies to live and breathe, not die.

And because sin brought death to us, God sent His Son Jesus Christ, whose little voice cried out after taking His first breath when He was born in this world. When He was baptized, the Holy Spirit came and remained on Him in this world until He died. When we read or hear the Gospel accounts of Jesus' suffering and death on the cross, His death is marked by words like, "**He breathed His last**" (Mk 15:37 ; Lk 23:26), literally, "**expired,**" or "**gave up His spirit**" (Jn 19:30; Mt. 27:50), "spirit" with a small "s." If you have ever been at the bedside of someone who has died, you probably know what a "last breath" is like. Jesus breathed His last breath on the cross and died, expired, even as His body gave up the Holy Spirit until He rose from the dead in His body.

God's reply to His own question, "**Can these bones live?**" is answered with a resounding "Yes" in Jesus' resurrection. "Can these remains of Joan's body live?" is answered in Jesus with a "Yes."

Many people are confused about what happens when someone dies. We see what happens to the body when it dies, but what happens to the soul? For people like Joan who are Christians, their souls at physical death go to be with Jesus and all the saints, all the Christians who have died before us. The souls of the saints do not become angels in heaven, angels watching over us on earth, but remain human, though incompletely so. The souls of unbelievers do not die, but go to hell where they wait for Judgment Day.

On the Day when Jesus returns in His glorious and risen body, He will raise all the dead in their bodies, reuniting the souls of the dead with their now raised bodies, to live forever, either with God in paradise if they are Christians, or with the devil and all his evil angels in the torments of hell if they died without faith in Jesus Christ, true God and true man, with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

In this life, God gave Joan the breath of life so she could live. But she did more than just exist. With breath in her lungs she could call her family together to eat, or sit with Harold or her children in the bleachers to cheer on her grandchildren on the sporting fields or courts. And because she was given the Holy Spirit at Baptism, she used that same breath to confess her faith in Jesus, to speak and sing and pray. With that Spirit and breath she lived in her body until she gave up both. She breathed her last for now, but not forever.

Because Jesus died and rose for her, what God said to Ezekiel describes what will happen with these lifeless remains on the Last Day. **“Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live... and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army... And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put My Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD.”** And Joan won’t need to drag around an oxygen concentrator on that day or evermore. She won’t need to sit in the back of church because the walk to front is exhausting. Can these remains live? In Jesus’ name, they will. Amen.