

**UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho**

Worship
March 29, 2020

Announcements

Greetings! And welcome again to worship as the United Church of Christ Congregational. We're aren't in the familiar space where we like to gather, on the corner of Cedar and Fourth, but I do believe we are together this morning in worship and community. Whether we all sit down and simultaneously tune in at 9:30, or stop by at some random time that works for us as individuals or families, we are together in prayer and spirit. Whether we are gathered or scattered, we are still the Body of Christ, the Church of Jesus Christ. So welcome.

Along with this video, we're sending a PDF that contains the words for this service. If you have that accessible to you, it will provide an opportunity for you to join me in the responsive call to worship, the unison prayer of invocation, and even singing the songs. Please share in this time with me as fully as possible.

Let us worship God.

Gathering Song

Gathered here in the mystery of this hour
Gathered here in one strong body
Gathered here in the struggle and the power
Spirit, draw near.
(Phil Porter)

Call to Worship

In these days we ask, 'can our hopes live?'"
And you whisper to us,
'look to the buds on the trees eager to burst;
notice the flowers poking their heads out of the dirt;
watch the children chalking spring on the sidewalks.'
And we see how you love us, God of steadfast love.
In these moments we wonder, 'can our compassion live?'"
And you tell us,
'wipe the tears of a worried father over his son's illness;
ease the weariness of a mother facing a long shift at work;
shop for the neighbor who has no family.'

And we see how you love us, our Resurrection and our Life.
In the shadows of each night, we cry out, 'can our love live?'"
And you sing to us,
'witness the touch of a wife on her husband's papery skin;
pay attention to the birds which rush into the sky before spiraling down;
share the words you are given to offer to the empty-hearted.

And we see how you love us, Breath of our souls.

Silence is kept

Creator of life:

bring us hope, we pray.

Mourner of the dead:

take away our fears, we pray.

Refresher of dry lives:

bind us to God forever, we pray.

(Thom M. Shuman)

Prayer of Invocation

Compassionate God, the wind of your Spirit is the very sign of life for all who long for you. One breath from you and we are rescued from the arid valley of dry bones, given muscles and sinews and joy with which to praise you, and filled with the holy hope you grant to all your faithful children. Let our whole lives be filled with the life-breath of the Spirit, that what has lain dormant may burst into bloom, and what looks to us to be death may be revealed as but sleep before the emergence of new life. Amen.

(Rev. Elizabeth Dilley)

Scripture Reading Ezekiel 34:1-14

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord."

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, 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."

Sermon

I don't know if you remember back to the start of Lent, way back at the end of February, but I've been thinking about it a fair amount this week. One of the most obvious reasons it's been on my mind is because we're staring into the eyes of Palm Sunday, Holy Week and Easter. And as much as we'd all like nothing better than to be released from our tombs in two weeks, I just don't see it as safe, smart or responsible. So I'm scrambling and squirming and praying for ways to help us celebrate the feast that will have some notable restrictions and limitations placed on it this year. You'll likely hear more from me about that this week. I've also been aware of the traditions that talk about Lent as a time of fasting,

of giving up something, of going without for a season. I remember, back on the first Sunday of the season, on the first day of March, I made a conscious choice to not talk about that, and yet look where we are today, and all the things we've given up. As one Facebook meme I saw said, This is the Lentiest Lent I've ever Lented. And to think that I've never been all that big on giving anything up for the season. Yet even as I say that, I am keenly aware that none of this thing we're doing becomes a spiritual discipline unless we choose to make it one, unless we use this time to seek God's face and to turn our hearts and minds as fully as possible to the word and work, presence and peace of God. Even now. Even in the lockdown, quarantine, stay at home days of COVID19.

For a major portion of this week, I resisted thoughts of working with the passage I just read from Ezekiel 37, maybe because I thought it was a little too in our faces, but maybe also because I was nervous that it offers more than I can deliver this morning. But since transforming a valley of sun bleached, brittle old bones into a living, breathing community of the faithful isn't mine to deliver on, I finally decided I'd give it another look.

Ezekiel had a vision, one that was graphic and haunting, that had him staring at a desert scene with skulls and bones lying in disarray as far as the eye can see. I'll be honest: this week, the image it brought to my mind was the rows upon rows of Italian coffins that I've seen more times than I want to count, and a reference to refrigerator trucks lining up to help. And when writers and commentators asked me to ponder the question of our spiritual dry bones, what the difficult and painful paths in our lives might be, I wanted to scoff and say, let me count the ways. I suspect we all have our own go-to specifics: the numbers of infected as well as dead, the pleas from doctors, nurses and governors for supplies and beds, the economic disaster only just starting to unfold, the children out of school and parents out of work, the stay at home orders that at best inconvenience and frustrate us, at worst create dire circumstances for those cut off from the help they need. I think of the neighbors we've talked with this week, the Delta flight attendant whose trips to China long since dried up and now most every other option has as well; the man who has just learned his wife's cancer has returned and is moving back into chemo treatments and immune vulnerabilities, the woman whose husband is serving a prison sentence that has left her both alone and alienated from many of her neighbors.

For Ezekiel, the situation was exile in Babylon. The people had been carried into captivity and Jerusalem was under siege. As a prophet he'd invested a lot in confronting the people with their sins and God's anger, but that didn't make him immune to the pain of knowing the city had fallen and the temple had been destroyed. It's easy to assume he wondered what God was going to do next, and what his next assignment would be, when he received a vision of a valley of dry bones. In that vision, God showed him around and then asked, can these bones live? The word "no" was ready to explode out of Ezekiel's mouth, but he held on to a smidgen of hope, so he put it back on God: you know... maybe you can see a way...

As I read the story, God's answer was to say (but not this directly): yes, these bones can live, but we're going to have to work together on it. Ezekiel's task was to prophesy, to speak the word of God, to call the people together: for hip bones to be connected to thigh bones, and thigh bones connected to back bones. Ezekiel did as he was told, the bones lined up, took their assigned places and were knit together by sinews and muscles, skin and flesh; but that wasn't enough because they still weren't breathing. They needed, and received 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 at first. Ezekiel's vision ended 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? From there and as they moved out of the vision, God was clear with Ezekiel: Israel would be

restored and the people would make their way home. It was a promise they could depend on with every weary fiber and faded dream they had in them, and it was a promise whose fulfillment God was placing in the people's hands as well as God's.

The bones lined up and reconnected but the essential work wasn't done until they started to breathe. I read a wonderful article this week that filled that image out by talking about yoga and how essential breathing is to the healing, nurturing dynamic of yoga. Since I've only ever had one failed attempt at yoga, I thought about reading that writer's words to you to share the image, but somehow that didn't seem quite right. Then I thought about child birth and Lamaze lessons and how central breathing is to labor, but I don't have any direct knowledge of that either. Finally I settled on the experience of hiking mountains, and the hours upon hours I've spent learning how to breathe while I'm in the midst of putting one foot in front of the other, to slowly make my way to my destination. I often think of a former hiking companion who shared his mentor's wisdom with me. His mentor taught him to set a slow and steady pace and then just keep at it. Don't rush on the easy parts, don't stop and rest on a regular basis, just keep going one deliberate step at a time, and breathe with each and every one of those steps.

That image has gotten me up and over more summits than I can count, and if I stop and think about it, it's gotten me out of no small number of crises and nightmares. And I think it's our hope for the days that we find ourselves in too. We need to breathe. To pause, to calm ourselves, to not try and play out the whole huge scenario of when this is going to be in the rear view mirror, when we'll be released from our bondage and we can get on with our lives, how long it will take the economy to recover and what in the world is going to happen in the meantime, but to stop and breathe, take one step at a time and breathe before we take another. We get to take those steps and draw those breaths in the confidence that God is good and faithful to the promises God has made, that God gives and blesses and restores life. And then we can breathe again, and step again and keep on breathing.

I see that happening in marvelous and beautiful ways all around us. I think of the stories of restaurants delivering food to medical workers and people sewing masks to add a few more layers of protection. Grab and go stations are visible all over the country, making sure children are getting the meals they would have gotten if they were still in school. Teachers hold impromptu parades, driving by so they can catch a glimpse of their students, and their students can see them. Friends stage similar parades to celebrate birthdays and weddings. My friend Tim still gathers in his driveway with other musicians every night 10 minutes before sunset; they play 20 minutes of jazz as neighbors spill into the street to sing and dance and wish each other well. Carrie Newcomer showed up in her living room every day this past week to share a song over Facebook, and on Friday she gave an hour long benefit concert. Other musicians lean out windows or sit in front of care facilities. People leave gift bags on door handles, make phone calls to check in and say hello, run errands and deliver groceries. We saw a picture of our 8-year old grandson Garth standing at their storm door, which had a large blue tape grid on it, and playing tic tac toe with his buddy from across the street – with rumors that they might move on to Yahtzee next.

One step at a time, one breath at a time, trusting God to accompany us, to guide us, to nurture and protect us, and to give us life. We may be approaching the end of Lent, but I think we're going to continue with ample opportunity to practice the disciplines this season has offered: listening for the voice of God, and watching for the presence of God. Will we do what we can to share the love of God, to offer kindness, to lighten the darkness, to be a presence beside those who feel alone, to set aside our wants and wishes for the wellbeing of the weakest and most vulnerable?

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. Amen.

Song: "Breathe on Me, Breath of God"

Breathe on me, Breath of God, fill me with life anew
That I may love the way you love, And do what you would do.

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

Breathe on me, Breath of God, stir in me one desire;
That every earthly part of me may glow with holy fire.

Prayer Requests

Prayers for our world leaders making tough decisions, including the WHO and CDC. guidance for scientists and a shield around health care workers.

Prayers for the truck driver's out on the road delivering supplies and to the hospital workers who are battling this; for the patience to stay where we are and not rush out and spread the virus still further
For Gods love and kindness to overpower Satan's temptations in our world! That people will quit hoarding, so others don't suffer...and shelves in stores to be replenished!

Dallas' brother will be having another surgery

Safe travel for Gretchen and Romy as they travel to Bellingham to clear out her dorm room and Seattle to collect some things they need

Pastoral Prayer

Holy God, like the Psalmist, we cry out to you from the depths. These are trying times, unsettling times, strange and lonely times, and we come to you for healing and holding, for wisdom and patience, for trust and hope. We would never have dreamed that a virus could bring the world to a stop, but it has; and that world cries out to you now in pain and despair. We pray, O God, for the sick: those who are recovering at home and those gasping for breath and waiting for a ventilator; for those who are separated from the ones they love because of fear of contamination or because of the long hours of work they do on behalf of others; for those who have been told to stay at home, and all the challenges that come with that order: loss of jobs, the likelihood of abuse, or simply too many people trying to do too many things in one small space. We pray for those struggling with the loneliness of long days alone, the strain on relationships, the loss of support systems and caregivers, graduations and proms, retirement parties and closure. We pray especially for world leaders confronted with impossible choices, for the World Health Organization and CDC as they seek to lead our response, for the scientists who search for answers and alternatives, and for the health care workers who put themselves in harms way day after day. For all of the truck drivers and grocery store workers, cleaners and cooks, farmers and reporters who continue to work and serve and do what they can to lighten the load for others.

In the midst of all the anguish we give you thanks for signs of hope and beauty, the reminders that come to us day after day of how good people can be, how generous and kind. We give thanks for the helpers who make phone calls, deliver groceries, stop by and check in. For music that reaches across empty alleys and grab and go bags that keep children fed, for the ability to read bedtime stories through Facetime and reconnect with family miles away. For the technology that connects us, even when we're told to stay apart, and the ways that you work through it all to nurture and bless, encourage and sustain,

cherish and embrace.

Holy God, we give thanks for all we can learn in these days about what is important and what is not, how to recognize beauty in the midst of ugliness, how very connected we really are and how our actions impact the lives of people we'll never know, how little light it takes to soften the darkness, the ways in which the work of the church is not contained within a building, and how your Spirit knits us together with threads we may never see. Thank you for the love you lavish upon us, the hope you plant deep within us, the life with which you bless us, and the peace that is ours because we know you will be with us to guide, bless and protect us each and every day of our lives.

Hear our prayers, O God, the spoken and the unspoken. And hear us as we join together in the prayer that Jesus taught: Our Father...

Prayer of our Savior (debts)

Offertory

I skipped over this part last week, and I think that was a mistake. In our normal routine, this is the place where I invite your morning offering. I don't know how to ask Janice to pass the basket between us at the moment, but the church still needs your gifts. Except for some utility usage, our expenses haven't changed. You can mail your gift to the church at 408 Cedar Street, or ask your bank to mail a check to the church at that address, or you can drop it into the mail slot to the left of the door. Our offering is also about more than money for the church's ministry. It's also the ways in which we respond to the love and grace of God, the ways in which we put who we are and what we have to work on behalf of God and all God's people. Those are gifts we give in acts of service and volunteerism, in living kindness and offering compassion. Those are gifts we need to give as surely as the world needs to receive them. All of us have something to share, and all of our offerings are gratefully received.

Song "Dona Nobis Pacem"

Dona nobis pacem, pacem

Dona nobis pacem...

Benediction

Whatever wilderness the Spirit has brought you to:

walk in boldness, as a beloved child of God

walk in peace, under the shelter of the Most High

walk in faith, knowing Christ walks with you. Amen.

(Joanna Harader)