

March 29, 2020

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Reading: John 3.1-17

The Message: “Does God Breathe” or “Bless your Heart!”

Introduction

People have so much trouble trying to figure out what the Bible is. Some think it is hand written by God in blood or fire. Some think it is all history – complete historical fact. Some people have fought and even killed over different opinions about what the Bible says.

In this time of endless Facebook quizzes about your favourite pie, have you filled out the survey on which of 100 books you have read?

A few years ago, my daughter Alexandra got a book for her birthday from my brother: “1001 Books You Should Read Before You Die.” We celebrated her birthday and my dad’s 95th at the same time. Dad picked up Alex’s gift, thinking it was for him. My brother – with the family’s bizarre sense of humour, said, “No, I didn’t get that for you, Dad; for you I got **one** book.”

The Bible isn’t 1001 books, but it isn’t one book either. I have always been most comfortable thinking of the Bible as an inspired library, 66 books full of poetry and prose, history and historical fiction, song and proverb, parable and teaching, memoir and biography, epic, tragedy, comedy, novel, short story, myth, creative nonfiction, satire and drama – all including truth for your life and my life today.

I

But the passage from Ezekiel is more like the screenplay for a zombie movie.

A valley full of bones bleached by the sun, suddenly start clattering, coming together, ligaments and muscles start to join them together, and skin appears.

But still they don’t have life – they are like zombies.

But this isn’t a zombie flick: it’s a vision that the prophet Ezekiel has of bones coming to life.

God’s “breath entered them and they came alive! They stood up on their feet, a huge crowd.”

II

Probably experienced soon after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in 586 BC.

The people had lost all hope, a lot of them were dead.

They didn’t need a zombie movie but a vision of a God who breathes into the people life, **new** life.

This vision isn’t history, but metaphor. The bones are symbolic of the defeated people of Israel. And God is the source of the life that is bringing Israel back from the dead. When all life appears to have gone, God’s spirit is at work, reviving and restoring life through breath.

The Spirit of God is what gives you hope when all else fails you.

III

A child I know asked a theological question only a five year old could ask. "Does God breathe?" Great question.

Hebrew word *ruach* means breath, wind and spirit. And it is God's ruach – God's breath, wind and spirit that is breathed into the bones to give them life.

IV

Nicodemus comes to Jesus under cover of night to ask Jesus how to get into heaven. And Jesus tells him a story of a birth, a story of being born of the Spirit. Jesus told Nick that a life of faith is like being born of the Spirit, a spirit that blows like the wind, where it chooses: we hear the sound, but we don't know where it comes from or where it goes.

Nicodemus is confused. How can one be born of the spirit?

Jesus is telling him that one cannot earn a special place in God's kingdom. That's God's gift to us; living with the spirit, the breath of God within us – it's God's gift to us.

Having God's spirit in you means:
God loves you.

In my ministry, I was fortunate to work with two Methodist associates from Alabama and Tennessee. Whenever they were talking about someone who was creating a challenge for them, they would add onto the end of every sentence, "Bless her Heart!" This seemed to apply to those who, with the best of intentions, were driving them crazy.

But God really means, "Bless your heart!" all the time.

God loved you from your birth, from your baptism and loves you still, not because you do the right thing, but because you are you.

Today you have the opportunity to say, I trust you, God, even though I don't understand you. I can't control the spirit in me; you are still a mystery to me, but I trust that you love me.

And you join with others who are seeking to trust God in the good times and in these very bad times, who are trying to live out of that mysterious love God has for each of us. We are a group of people who are trying to live life trusting in God's love and letting the spirit in us guide us to treat others as God's gifts.